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NOVEMBER 15, 2010 • $4.95

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BY STEPHEN F. HAYES

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He Just Doesn't Get It

Politicians long ago mastered the art of the non-apology apology: "I'm sincerely sorry to all those who were offended by my statement . . . " (*sotto voce*: *all three or four of you, you hypersensitive twits, and you know you're just pretending to be outraged, so shut up already*).

They also have mastered the art of non-humble humility: "That's an excellent question, Anderson. What do I think are my weaknesses? Well, I certainly have my share, as my wife would be the first to tell you. For one, as she rightly complains, I too often burn the midnight oil looking after my constituents. The problem is, I care too damn much. I also lose my temper too easily, especially when I see the little guy taking it on the chin. And I get too impatient with the lobbyists who come seeking favors. Just the other day I physically ejected from my office a banker looking for a bailout. A better man than I would have asked him politely to take his leave. Those are just a few of my shortcomings, Anderson. . . . "

The special genius of Barack Obama is to combine the spirit of the non-apology apology with non-humble humility and an extra helping of learning a "lesson" that flatters himself, rather than the lesson the voters actually sent.

Here is how an AP report on Friday after the election summarizes his reaction to the voters' historic rebuke, "Obama Acknowledges His Message Didn't Get Through."

"Leadership is not just legislation," Obama told an interviewer for *60 Minutes*. "It's a matter of persuading people. And giving them confidence and bringing them together. And setting a tone. And making an argument that people can understand. . . . We haven't always been successful at that. . . . And I take personal responsibility for that. And it's something that I've got to examine closely as I go forward."

So he sounds rueful but is actually unrepentant. He seems to think his legislation was great, and a tribute to his leadership. But the voters just didn't understand. Well, he's going to "examine" that going forward. Not that he'll necessarily change any of his policies, though he may have to start using more single-syllable words to get the message through to all the thick-headed Americans who didn't understand his arguments. Yes, that's the ticket.

But what about the voters' message to him? Seems like that bounced off the presidential thinking cap. So we'll summarize it for him, using his favorite metaphor. It went like this: "Mr. President, you took a wrong turn. You were supposed to go straight down Prosperity Avenue, but mistakenly hung a hard left into the Health Care cul-de-sac. You should have stopped at that point and backed out. But you stomped on the accelerator instead of the brake. We'll generously call it a case of unintended acceleration. In any event, we're stuck in the Slough of Despond. So we've decided to make John Boehner the designated driver." ♦

What They Were Thinking

AP / THE ENQUIRER / PATRICK REDDY

Rand Paul, Republican senator-elect from Kentucky, receives encouragement on the campaign trail from his predecessor, retiring senator Jim Bunning.

Did He Really Say That?

What exactly did President Obama mean when he told a group of supporters prior to the midterm elections that he wanted to "export jobs"? As a friend of The Scrapbook helpfully pointed out, at a DNC Moving America Forward rally in Bridgeport, Conn., the president urged voters "to set the direction not just for this state but for this country for years to come." Then, later in the speech, when his devotees were too

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drunk on rhetoric to notice, Obama said, "We see an America where we invest in homegrown innovation and ingenuity so we can export jobs, not just import goods. We want to make it easier to start a business or patent an invention."

What was that about exporting jobs? Apparently not a misprint: The line is repeated in a network transcript and on the White House website. Maybe Obama was just thrown off by the heckling AIDS activists. Perhaps the commander in chief meant to say "import jobs, not just import goods." Or maybe he really wants to export jobs. He certainly just did a good job outsourcing the work of the House of Representatives to a new set of workers. ♦

Great Moments in Academese

An abstract from the latest issue of the journal *Sport in Society*:

> Dressed for success? The NBA's dress code, the workings of whiteness and corporate culture: This paper explores the constitutive power relations and representational politics produced through the advent of a dress-code policy instituted by the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2005. Using the methodology of contextual cultural studies this analysis suggests that far from a simple policy that requires a particular style of dress, narratives and practices surrounding the policy are embedded in an economic rationale frequently embraced in corporate cultures that also reproduce whiteness. In recontextualizing the dress code this paper maps out and makes visible the complex processes which both venerate and demonize the athleticism and entertainment value of the league's black masculine bodies, and simultaneously deny the salience of political, social and economic processes that produce discourses of a commercialized white normativity. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to generate broader public pedagogical interest in these contexts in order to promote new understandings of the dress code in the quest for social justice.

The Scrapbook's translation? Charles Barkley put this more succinctly in 2005, as reported in the *Los Angeles Times*:

> Young black kids dress like NBA players. . . . Unfortunately, they don't get paid like NBA players. So when they go out in the real world, what they wear is held against them. See, these players make $10 million to $15 million a year, so nobody cares how they dress. But regular black kids go out into the real world and how they dress is held against them.
>
> If a well-dressed white kid and a black kid wearing a do-rag and throwback jersey came to me in a job interview, I'd hire the white kid. That's reality. That's the No. 1 reason I support the dress code.

The Scrapbook, for its part, dresses as it does precisely in order to de-emphasize the athleticism and entertainment value of its white masculine body—and you must admit, if you chance to meet us, that we do a pretty good job of it. ♦

The Nanny State Lives

The Scrapbook extends its sympathy to the children of northern California. Not only is their economic future less than bright but now government officials are rifling

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through their Happy Meal bags.

On Election Day, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a law restricting restaurants' freedom to give away toys with kids' meals. The law is another effort to fight childhood obesity, and lawmakers hope to motivate children and their parents to make healthier eating choices by withholding free toys. Want a free action figure from the latest Disney animated feature? First, say no to high calories and eat your apple slices (without the complimentary caramel sauce, thank you very much).

The meals will be required to meet certain nutritional standards before a toy may be included. Only meals containing fewer than 600 calories and providing an adequate serving of fruit and vegetables will be permitted to reward children with a free toy. The law could take effect by December 2011 (just in time to spread holiday cheer) and is targeted at McDonald's, whose Happy Meals are made "happier" not just by their golden fries but by the free toy found inside.

The good news: The law is not being well-received. San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom has promised to veto the measure, although the board likely has enough votes to overturn. The California Restaurant Association has also spoken out in opposition. Spokesman Daniel Conway placed the law in context of the Giants' recent World Series victory by saying, "One day you're world champions, and the next day, no toys for you."

In happier news, the legendary McRib sandwich is back at McDonald's locations in San Francisco and across the country. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

'Even though it was predicted, it was still a shock to see voters humiliate a brilliant and spellbinding young president, who'd had such a Kennedy-like beginning, while electing a lot of conservative nuts and . . . " (Maureen Dowd, *New York Times*, November 3). ♦

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Democracy in America

Every four years, I observe a hallowed election tradition: I strap on my civic pride, gather my reporting utensils, and go watch my former brother-in-law, Mike Benton, get stomped like a Woodrow Wilson impersonator at a Glenn Beck rally.

In 2002, I documented how Mike was obliterated in his clerk of the court race in our own Calvert County, Maryland. In 2006, I watched him finish eighth out of ten candidates in the county commissioner's race. Originally christening our journey "Road to the White House 2016," Mike, who divorced my sister-in-law over 15 years ago, has since scaled back his ambitions.

He returned to his small, scrappy hometown of North Beach, abutting the Chesapeake Bay, remodeled the cottage where his grandmother raised him, and this year ran for one of six unpaid town council seats. Mike explains he once thought he could do good for the whole county. "Now, I'm down to doing good for North Beach. After this, I'm looking at 3rd & Frederick." But he can't quit, he says, not until he gets rid of all his "Got Mike" campaign T-shirts.

As we knock on doors the Sunday before Election Day, with Mike scampering through flower beds to hit as many as possible before the Redskins game starts ("After that they'll shoot you"), I notice some changes. At 44, Mike still appeals to female voters—the only title he's ever won is Northern High School's Best Looking, circa 1984—but he no longer tries to gain their votes by dating roughly half of them. (His longtime girlfriend, Tina, is campaign treasurer.) While he once relocated competitors' signs, he now lets them stand. Though if rival candidates leave Halloween candy on doorsteps with their literature, "I'll eat it," he confesses.

Not to suggest Mike's gone soft. On any given weekend, when buying shots for prospective voters at local watering holes, after he's had enough firewater, Mike's likely to try to reenlist in the Marines, to give his mates a jujitsu lesson, or to stand naked before the voter. Literally. He is known to remove some or all of his clothing and run home in a fleshy white blur. "I get hot," Mike explains. "He's had that problem since he was a toddler," his cousin Anna seconds. "He just never liked clothes."

MICHAEL SLOAN

Still, Mike seems driven in a way he wasn't before. Since my last visit, he's been splitting his time between his real estate company and a business-coaching venture, counseling everyone from corporations to unemployed Ph.D.s. While he says, "In coaching, you're either karaoke or Bon Jovi—I'm still karaoke," his goal is to touch millions of lives, sharing the aphorisms that have helped him, such as, "You either make your economy, or your economy makes you."

Though he's faced tough times in the past—he once had to sell his refrigerator to make ends meet—and wants to help others face theirs, the fear still nags as we stumble out of Neptune's, fortified with beer for the difficult days ahead. What if he loses again? He reasons that next time, he'll be relegated to running for dog catcher. As if on cue, two neighborhood dogs start barking at him. "Look, they know," says Mike, shaking a defiant fist their way, "Fear me! Fear me, now!"

On Election Day, we gather with the other hopefuls outside the polls in front of the North Beach Community Center. Most of Mike's nine competitors are respectable lawyers and such. But then Junior Lubbes rides up on an orange scooter, wearing a camo boonie hat, his shirt unbuttoned to mid-sternum. Junior tells me he spends his days hauling trash. (Not for money, another old-timer suggests, "for fun.") And he has just about enough teeth left to wrestle a Chiclet into submission. "Look at it this way," says Mike, "he never gets food caught between his teeth." Junior shares his unofficial campaign slogan: "If they want me, they want me. If they don't, they don't."

"Whatever else happens," confides Mike, "I can't lose to Junior."

And he doesn't. The polls close, results are announced, and Mike rolls over not only Junior, he rolls over everyone, garnering 412 out of 550 votes. At his ebullient victory party at the Westlawn Inn, I'm not even sure I know Mike anymore. This man who has made an art of losing is now a winner. Where does that leave me and this franchise of failure that has spanned one-fifth of our lives?

Mike sees me sulking, and bucks me up. He says not to worry. In four more years, he might run for mayor. There will always be new failures to celebrate.

Matt Labash

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the weekly Standard

What's So Great About America

Marco Rubio will have to write a new speech sooner or later, but he shouldn't hurry up on our account. We still enjoy the one he's been giving all year. He delivered it again to a national television audience on Election Night, after walloping not one but two formidable opponents in his campaign for a vacant Florida Senate seat. Along with his gift for wooing voters, the speech has made Rubio, according to a chorus of news accounts, a "rising star"—even, said one *Vanity Fair* writer who should know, a "matinee idol." Republicans might want to ponder why.

The theme of the speech, and the source of its power, is American exceptionalism. "It's sometimes easy to forget how special America really is," Rubio says. "But I was raised by exiles . . . by people who clearly understand how different America is from the rest of the world." Rubio's parents, who fled Castro's tyranny, taught him this difference by their words and by their example. Rubio makes his case for American exceptionalism with both an appeal to authority—the word of his parents—and an appeal to experience: The good life America offered them is itself proof that his country, in its political, social, and economic arrangements, is unlike any other in history.

Rubio's speech dares to cast our political differences in the grandest terms. Politics becomes a matter of history and ideas rather than motive-mongering and pie-slicing. It has been heartening to see other Republican politicians pick up his theme of exceptionalism, and we commend it to those who haven't. During the campaign Sarah Palin and her handcrafted candidates repeated the "E" word as though it had magical powers. And maybe it does. Lt. Col. Allen West, like Rubio a Floridian and one of two African Americans to win congressional seats for the Republicans last week, tucked every one of his policy positions, from modernizing the military to cutting the federal budget, under the rubric "Restoring American Exceptionalism."

Not every candidate needs to go so far as West. Some political issues, after all, do not necessarily touch on first principles. Republicans must take care that "exceptionalism" doesn't collapse through thoughtless repetition into a mere slogan, another bit of political cant like "Take Our Country Back" or "Move America Forward," losing all meaning even as it wows the focus groups. For the line of argument that Rubio pursues, his way of framing the choice that voters face in the Obama era, is uncommonly—you might say, exceptionally—useful, for three reasons.

First, the idea of American exceptionalism has the benefit of being true. The United States is fundamentally and demonstrably different from other countries. It is bound together by a founding proposition, and properly applied the proposition has brought freedom and prosperity to more people, and more kinds of people, than any other. Second, a large majority of Americans believe American exceptionalism to be true. And third, it drives Democrats right around the bend.

It's not clear why. Maybe liberal polemicists don't quite understand what the phrase means, and so they pummel it into a caricature. In *Politico* last week, under the oddly truncated headline "U.S. Is Not Greatest Country Ever," the columnist Michael Kinsley wrote that exceptionalism is "the theory that Americans are better than everybody else." The next day, on a well-trafficked liberal website, another columnist said much the same thing—they tend to run in packs, these guys. Other countries, this columnist wrote, are "investing in infrastructure," unlike the United States, which apparently just spent $780 billion in stimulus on chopped liver. At the same time, he went on, "the Republicans have taken refuge in an antigovernment ideology premised on the lunatic notion that America is the only truly free and successful country in the world."

Assuming they were offered in good faith, these characterizations are hopelessly confused, conflating exceptionalism with jingoism or xenophobia or mere self-aggrandizement. (He got the antigovernment part right, though.) But even if they do understand what the term means, we can't

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be sure that professional Democrats really believe it. Liberalism in its present degenerate form is reactionary—a gesture of irritation at the backward quality of ordinary American life, at its culture, its food and dress and amusements and politics, and especially at the mindless and sentimental patriotism that unsophisticated Americans are so quick to embrace.

President Obama—who in other venues, such as his Nobel speech, has given eloquent testimony to America's uniqueness—last year made a now notorious remark that nicely summarized the off-the-shelf liberal view. "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." The logic is straightforward. Since every people believes it's exceptional, none is. And thus our belief in American exceptionalism merely shows how much we're like everybody else; the assertion disproves itself. We all of us here on Spaceship Earth indulge in a kind of touching childish delusion, akin to a toddler's belief that he's the center of the universe. We really should grow up.

For many sophisticated Democrats the belief is not merely childish but dangerous. It distracts us from the urgent matters at hand. "This conceit that we're the greatest country ever may be self-immolating," Kinsley wrote. "If people believe it's true, they won't do what's necessary to make it true."

This strikes us—and will strike most Americans, we'll wager—as the precise opposite of the truth. Americans through time have already done "what's necessary to make" the country unique in all the world; that's why Glenn Beck and all those Tea Partiers prattle endlessly on about the Founders. Thanks to the ingenuity, persistence, and sacrifice of earlier generations, our obligation now is to conserve the arrangements that make us exceptional, reaffirm them, and prepare to pass them on, with an abiding faith in personal liberty. And this much should be obvious: If Americans don't believe "we're the greatest country ever," we won't be for much longer.

Sounds like a campaign theme.

—Andrew Ferguson

Hold the Balloons

On November 7, 2006, the Democrats marked their takeover of Congress with a raucous celebration at the Hyatt Regency hotel on Capitol Hill. Balloons and confetti fell from the ceiling as the party's leaders stood on the stage arm-in-arm, beaming with joy. "Tonight is a great victory for the American people," Nancy Pelosi declared, as Chuck Schumer pumped his fists in the air behind her.

Last week, after retaking the House, coming two-thirds of the way toward retaking the Senate, and capturing hundreds of state and local offices from the Democrats in every region of the country, Republicans struck a much more subdued tone. No balloons, no blaring music, no fists in the air. John Boehner, the presumptive speaker of the House, did not even declare Republicans triumphant. "We have real work to do, and this is not a time for celebration," he told the crowd.

Boehner seemed to understand that the Republicans' victory was not a vote of confidence from the electorate. It was a cry for help in the face of two years of reckless, hyperactive liberalism that threatens to make the country's considerable problems even worse. Voters demanded that today's governing challenges—and especially the weak economy and exploding deficits and debt—be taken seriously. They have given Republicans the beginning of a chance to do so.

It is only the beginning because, as Boehner also said, "We must remember it is the president who sets the agenda for our government." Not much can be done from the House of Representatives alone. But not nothing, either. Republicans can show the country what a serious approach to governing looks like—articulating an alternative vision, proposing concrete solutions (even if they get vetoed), and looking for opportunities to force President Obama into positions that require him to moderate and compromise.

Boehner's speech offered hope that Republicans understand this. And in the days since, both Boehner and his deputy—Eric Cantor, who will likely be the House majority leader in the new Congress—have offered some further proof.

The day after the election, Cantor released a document directed to Republican members and members-in-waiting that laid out his view of how the new Congress should operate. He highlighted the need to deal with entitlements, while acknowledging that so far Republicans have not been specific enough. He made repealing Obamacare—piece by piece if a wholesale repeal doesn't work—the Republicans' top priority.

Since all the Republicans will really control after January is the House of Representatives, much of what Boehner and Cantor have had to say has involved changes internal to the House. The new House will, for instance, systematically review federal regulations that depress job creation. It will also require that before bills reach the floor their sponsors articulate what constitutional authority justifies the action they propose and why it is an action better taken at the federal than the state or local level. Boehner and Cantor, moreover, have promised to bring back the practice of rescission bills, which take back spending that has been appropriated but not yet spent; to ban earmarks; to build the House schedule around com-

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mittee hearings rather than floor votes; and to do away with silly votes to commemorate local events or declare national popcorn month.

These are small and largely symbolic first steps, to be sure. There is much more the Republicans could do, even when it comes to internal reforms of the House—and particularly when it comes to the appropriations process. And there are some very real tests coming soon: the fight to retain the Bush tax cuts, the first Republican budget, the next round of the health care debate.

But symbols matter. And the message that Boehner and Cantor seem intent on sending in these early days is not one of glee or celebration but of sober, serious commitment to take on the painful governing choices the country now faces.

Boehner and Cantor know they have not really won anything yet, and the struggle to get the federal government under control and the country on track to prosperity is only beginning. It will take years of effort in Congress, and a successful presidential election in 2012. But a good start is essential. And a good start is what we have.

—*Yuval Levin*

Pelosi for Minority Leader!

The Weekly Standard was already in good cheer after Tuesday's election. But then came the news at the end of the week, as the magazine went to press, that Nancy Pelosi has decided to try to retain her position as the top House Democrat, and will stand for House minority leader in January.

Now, there are those, of a churlish disposition, who would note that Speaker Pelosi has presided over the largest loss of House seats by a party in a midterm election in 62 years. There are second-guessers who would question her strategy and tactics on the stimulus, cap and trade, and health care. There are Democrats lured by the superficial attraction of a new face as leader of their party in the House. There are Democrats in swing districts who are tempted by the prospect of their party following a more moderate path. Indeed, there are defeated congressmen who—unjustly, to be sure!—actually *blame* the speaker for their soon-to-be unemployed status.

We urge Democrats to reject all such considerations and counsels. We urge the remaining House Democrats to keep Nancy Pelosi as their leader.

After all, Pelosi has not shied away from the challenges of leadership. She's gotten major pieces of legislation through the House, even if they were all bad, and unpopular to boot. And as Pelosi wrote in a letter to colleagues on November 5, "Our work is far from finished. As a result of Tuesday's election, the role of Democrats in the 112th Congress will change, but our commitment to serving the American people will not. We have no intention of allowing our great achievements to be rolled back."

No, indeed. For the good of the republic (and the GOP), House Democrats in the 112th Congress need to march further down the path they blazed in the 111th Congress. They must not falter in defending Obamacare, in insisting on tax hikes, in seeking to impose new burdens on the economy, and in trying to undercut our troops in Afghanistan.

House Democrats must reject the counsel of timidity of Rep. John Yarmuth of Kentucky, who said on November 4, "As good a leader as she has been, I don't think she's the right leader to take us forward." Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, who now ranks second to Pelosi but who has more moderate inclinations, would be "a perfect spokesman for the Democratic party in the House," Yarmuth said.

House Democrats: Ignore that man!

Indeed, House Democrats seem poised to ignore Yarmuth. They seem ready to maintain Pelosi. They may even deprive the moderate Hoyer of his number-two spot.

To which we say, Good for you! Don't be intimidated by the election returns! Stand by your woman!

It is inspiring to imagine that, at the nominating meeting of the House Democratic caucus, some congressman, echoing Gene McCarthy's speech for Adlai Stevenson at the 1960 Democratic convention, will stand before the assembly and say: "House Democrats: Do not turn away from this woman. Do not reject this woman. She has fought gallantly. She has fought courageously. Do not leave this prophet without honor in her own party!"

The 1960 Democratic convention rejected McCarthy's plea, of course. It nominated John Kennedy, who went on to win the presidency. But today's Democrats seem inclined to avoid following the hard-headed, hawkish, culturally mainstream model of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey. Instead, today's Democrats revel in their status as heirs to Adlai Stevenson. For today's Democrats, Nancy Pelosi will be an exemplary House minority leader. May she live long and prosper in the job!

—*William Kristol*

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Back to the Bush Coalition

Where have we seen this majority before? BY JAY COST

GARY LOCKE

The story of last week's midterm battle is clear: It was an election about President Barack Obama, and the American people voted against him. According to the exit polls, voters nationwide disapproved of the president's performance by a 9-point margin, 45-54 percent, and while their impressions of the Republican party were generally negative, they nevertheless gave the GOP what should turn out to be at least a 7-point margin of victory in the popular vote for the House. This was less than the final preelection polls had predicted, but it nevertheless amounts to the largest Republican margin of victory in the popular vote for the House since 1946. It should be good for a net gain of 63 or 64 seats in the lower chamber.

The exit polls indicate that voters were dissatisfied with the way Washington has done business since Barack Obama became president. Dissatisfaction was not limited to the sluggish pace of economic recovery. Voters also disapproved of the health care bill, the stimulus package, and the level of deficit spending; they expressed a sense that government has become too big and too intrusive.

More than half of all voters said that President Obama's policies will "hurt the country," and the general impression left by the reams of exit poll cross tabs is that in 2010, the American people agree with Ronald Reagan's declaration, "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem." Despite their disapproval of the Republican party, voters disliked the Democratic party enough to give the GOP another chance.

None of this is much of a surprise, except to those who refused to believe the rebuke was coming. Pollsters Scott Rasmussen, Pat Caddell, and Doug Schoen have been warning Democrats for some time that the midterms would be calamitous for them. Liberals ignored them during the campaign, and many will continue to do so, preferring to see the results as a consequence of the irrational wrath of voters who wrongly punished the Democrats for the failures of the Bush administration. The "Democratic" label has become an ironic appellation, as this "bitter/cling" explanation for voter opposition has taken hold on the left.

The midterm results also revealed that some longstanding alignments are still in place. Again, this might come as a surprise to liberals who mistook Barack Obama's victory in 2008 for the

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beginning of a new, enduring Democratic majority. The 2010 midterms proved that their interpretation was wrong. The midterm battle revealed that the "Bush majority" is still alive and well—and strong enough to sweep the Republican party to its largest House majority in several generations.

As Republicans position themselves for the battles of the 112th Congress as well as the upcoming presidential campaign, it is critical that they understand the precise nature of their political coalition, for the Bush majority has both important strengths and dangerous weaknesses, both of which were on display last week.

First, a note on terminology. This is indeed the Bush majority, not the Reagan majority, and it looks nothing like any previous Republican coalition.

George W. Bush is the first Republican in history to win an election without a single electoral vote from the Northeast, the historic base of the Republican party. Indeed, Bush's victories in 2000 and 2004 looked quite a bit like the coalitions Democrats used to build prior to the New Deal—uniting the South and the West, with a handful of Midwestern swing states. George W. Bush is himself the symbol of his coalition. Its base is in the South, but not the Old South of plantations, poverty, and Jim Crow; rather, the New South, a center of industry, commerce, and growth. Its core voters are not the old Jacksonians who trace their lineage deep in Southern history, but Northern transplants who came to Dixie to make something of themselves, just as the Bush family did.

The most notable strength of this coalition is its breadth. Conservatives pointed with pride to maps of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections showing the vast geographical scope of the Bush appeal—huge seas of red with only a few blue pockets. Democrats would counter that those red spaces are mostly empty, but that isn't true. In fact, George W. Bush won more than 240 congressional districts in 2000 even though he lost the popular vote, and he won more than 250 districts in 2004. In both contests, he won a comfortable majority of the 50 states.

Though the 2010 midterms produced the largest Republican House majority in almost 70 years, it is not quite right to call this majority historic, as it is really just a consolidation of the Bush vote. Of the 67 Democratic-held congressional districts where Republicans won or, as of this writing, were leading in the count, Bush received on average 55 percent of the vote in 2004. Bush defeated Kerry in 57 of these districts.

In other words, the GOP won last week essentially by convincing Bush voters to pull the lever once again for Republican congressional candidates. And for all the mythology about Barack Obama's political charisma and academic brilliance, this is a possibility that he and his advisers apparently overlooked as they plotted the first half of his presidency. Their congressional majority depended entirely on districts that had backed George W. Bush in two close elections, and it was a terrible idea to push left-wing legislation repellent to the ticket-splitters who had empowered congressional Democrats in the first place.

Republicans managed just two pickups in the Pacific West and two in New England, losing most of the toss-ups.

Over time, the Bush majority could very easily come to dominate Congress. The GOP lost its majority because of "black swan" events—a war going badly in 2006 and a catastrophic economic collapse right before the 2008 election—but the essentials are still there for Republican control of both chambers over the long run. The structure of congressional elections favors broad coalitions such as the Bush majority, and that bodes well for the future of the Republican party and the conservative movement.

It's not all sunshine and roses for Republicans, however. While the GOP did amazingly well in Southern and Midwestern congressional districts last week, winning most of the toss-up races and surprising the Democrats in a few districts, Republicans managed just two pickups in the Pacific West and two in New England, losing most of the toss-ups and even a few races where they were favored. This lackluster performance is strongly reminiscent of the Bush years. While the 43rd president built a broad electoral coalition, many voters who did not participate in it—so-called "Blue Staters," usually in the Northeast and on the West Coast—felt deeply alienated from it. And while President Obama is not terribly popular in either region, voters there are still not prepared to swing behind the Republican party.

Of course, intense opposition is not necessarily a problem for a political coalition. Delegates to the 1928 Republican National Convention cheered loudly for Herbert Hoover, but that didn't stop the Democrats from winning six of the next eight presidential elections. And while they will never admit it, all political parties develop programs that make winners out of some voters and losers out of others. Firm, even strident opposition is to be expected.

The problem for Republicans is that while the Bush coalition is broader than its opposition, it is not nearly as firm. Thus, when the support of Bush voters falters, liberal Democrats are fully prepared to make the most of it. This was a key factor in the undoing of the GOP's congressional majority in 2006. Gore/Kerry voters were strongly opposed to George W. Bush as early as 2003. Intensity, however, is not enough in elections where everybody gets one vote, so Bush and the Republicans could hold the line. But when the war effort slipped, the Bush coalition weakened, and its highly motivated opponents were there to seize the advantage.

Unfortunately for the Republicans, something like this happened in the Nevada and Colorado Senate races last week, where Democrats Harry Reid and Michael Bennet hung on by slender margins. These are both states that George W. Bush carried twice. This year, the Republicans won the popu-

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lar vote for the House in both states, but lost critically important Senate contests. The reason was terribly weak candidates whom the Democrats successfully labeled as extreme. This was sufficient to scare just enough of the Bush vote away to deliver victory to the Democrats. In both Nevada and Colorado, the county by county returns tell exactly the same story: The Democrats' firm bases came in strong, while the Republican-leaning areas did not lean Republican enough. Even though President Obama's job approval was negative in both states, his allies won reelection to the Senate.

What's more, this pattern was not confined to Colorado and Nevada, although these states were the most prominent examples. If we consider President Obama's current job approval and President Bush's 2004 vote, it is fair to say that Christine O'Donnell in Delaware, Rand Paul in Kentucky, Pat Toomey in Pennsylvania, and even John Kasich in Ohio underperformed reasonable expectations for 2010. On the other side of the coin, Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania, Mark Kirk in Illinois, Rob Portman in Ohio, and Dino Rossi in Washington overperformed.

The lesson here is that, while the Bush coalition remains a potential majority alliance, it is an unstable one. It requires a solid messenger, one whose appeal is too broad for him or her to be damaged by the Democrats' predictable accusation of extremism. Republicans need to bear this in mind as they begin to deliberate over the party's nominee for president in 2012. They need to ask themselves whether each contender is sufficiently conservative to be a good steward of both the government and the Republican brand, but they also must ask whether each can articulate the conservative message in a way that resonates with a broad cross-section of the American people.

Perhaps the best metaphor is the political alignment of the decades after the Civil War. The Republicans were the majority party, but barely. Most elections were close-fought, and economic downturns easily swept the Democrats into the congressional majority. Yet the Republicans won most presidential battles during this period because they nominated politically attractive candidates—typically from Midwestern swing states—who satisfied all factions within the party without scaring off swing voters.

Republicans need to do something like this in 2012. They should expect a tough, down-to-the-wire battle with President Obama, one where Midwestern swing voters will again determine the outcome. What they will need to win is a candidate in whom the conservative base has confidence, but who does not scare off those marginal Bush voters who have been deciding elections for a decade. If they can find such a candidate, Barack Obama and his Democratic party will be in a great deal of trouble. If they can't, then Obama might very well be reelected in 2012, just as Reid and Bennet were last week, by default. ♦

Voters Say, 'Focus on Jobs!'

By Thomas J. Donohue
President and CEO
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The American people have spoken loud and clear. They want their newly elected Congress to focus on job creation and economic growth. Voters rejected increased government spending, higher taxes, a government takeover of health care, and the burdensome regulations that have delayed our recovery and have caused crippling uncertainty for businesses. This election confirms that America is still a free enterprise nation.

As political leaders interpret the election results and determine their strategies and agendas, the U.S. Chamber will focus on the following priorities—beginning in the lame-duck session and extending into the new Congress.

We will urge all elected officials to heed the will of the people and make economic growth and jobs their top priority. It's time to put the brakes on the unbridled growth of government spending, taxes, and regulations, which are collectively stalling our economic recovery and stifling the creation of new private sector jobs.

We will push for *immediate* action to forestall one of the largest tax increases in history, which will take effect on January 1 unless Congress takes action. In a weak economy, lawmakers must, at least temporarily, renew the expiring 2001 and 2003 tax relief, while addressing expired business tax credits and the alternative minimum tax.

We will continue working to fix—through legislative, regulatory, and legal action when necessary—the worst excesses of the recently passed health care and financial reform bills. Voters made it very clear that they want a more sensible approach to our energy and environmental challenges by removing from office a number of representatives who voted for the unworkable Waxman-Markey climate bill last year.

America is, in many ways, a nation at risk. Our competitive position in the world is slipping. The challenges facing us economically, fiscally, and demographically are immense. From infrastructure to education to immigration to job creation, Americans want solutions and action, not more excuses and finger-pointing. It's time to become a can-do nation once again, a nation that embraces big ideas to solve big problems, a nation that restores its faith in a free enterprise economy supported by a responsible and frugal government.

This election was historic by any measure—more seats changed hands than in any other contest going back to 1948. But it's time to put politics aside and start working on bipartisan solutions to the challenges that are facing this country. Americans want to go back to work. Let's make it happen starting now.

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The Odds on Obama II

Don't put money on a second term.

BY JONATHAN V. LAST

So far he has narrowed his coalition, not broadened it, as successful first-term presidents do.

AP IMAGES / CHARLES DHARAPAK

Like baseball players taking comfort in rituals, in times of uncertainty politicians look to historical trends. For Barack Obama this week, those trends are a mixed bag.

In the modern era (meaning after 1936, when polling appeared in presidential politics), sitting presidents have had an excellent success rate in reelection. Eleven sitting presidents have run for reelection; three of them lost (Ford, Carter, George H.W. Bush) and one of them withdrew to avoid likely defeat (Johnson). That's either a .636 or a .727 batting average, a pretty fair mark.

What's more, each of these failed presidents faced a serious primary opponent. (The last incumbent president to lose without one was Herbert Hoover in 1932; he had enough trouble as it was.) There's an outside chance that Obama could draw a challenge from the left—perhaps a Russ Feingold or a Howard Dean—based in large part on foreign policy dissent. But any such fight would be merely symbolic: President Obama enjoys monolithic support from black voters—on the day after the president's agenda was nationally rebuffed, Obama carried a 96 percent approval rating among blacks. Since black voters make up a fifth of the Democratic primary electorate, it would be difficult for a Democratic challenger to make headway against Obama.

The news gets better for Obama when you look at the history of midterm defeats. Roosevelt endured two large midterm losses, one in 1938 (Republicans gained 75 seats in the House) and another four years later (the GOP gained 47 seats). He won reelection both times. In Truman's first midterm, Republicans gained 55 seats; he later escaped with a 50 percent to 45 percent victory over Thomas Dewey.

After 1948 the picture becomes slightly muddled. In Lyndon Johnson's 1966 midterm Republicans picked up 47 seats. Gerald Ford saw Democrats net 49 seats in his. Neither man was elected again. Yet Jimmy Carter lost only 14 House seats before losing to Reagan. Bill Clinton lost 54 seats and won reelection handily. So while a midterm blowout has policy implications, it is far from a predictor of the next presidential election.

There ends Obama's good news. Against these bullish historical trends are set two very bearish ones. The first is that no president since FDR has run for reelection with the unemployment rate above 8 percent. And the outlook for 2012 is grim. The White House Office of Management and Budget projects 8.1 percent unemployment in 2012. So does the Congressional Budget Office. And those are the rosy scenarios. Other forecasters, from Goldman Sachs to the IMF, predict that the unemployment rate will be 10 percent in 2011 and only somewhat lower in 2012.

Of course, 24-month forecasts are a black box. Two years ago the Office of Management and Budget predicted that today's unemployment rate would be 5.1 percent. Last Friday, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the October unemployment level was 9.6 percent.

So what if it is high? Roosevelt won reelection in 1940 with unemployment at 14.6 percent. But that was a marked improvement from where it sat two years earlier, at 19 percent. Even if jobs were to mushroom over the next 24 months and the unemployment rate did drop to 8 percent, it would still be higher than it was when George W. Bush left office. People may not remember, but on the day Barack Obama was elected president, unemployment was 6.5 percent. In 2012 Republicans will remind everyone in America of this fact.

The final trend, however, is the most troubling for Obama, because it hints

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at an underlying problem with his presidency: Since FDR, no president has won reelection without enlarging his share of the popular vote.

Roosevelt was elected with 57 percent in 1932. He expanded his support to 61 percent four years later and saw it drop to a "mere" 55 percent in his third campaign. Since then, all successful reelections have featured an expansion of the president's base. Eisenhower went from 55 percent to 57 percent; Nixon from 43 percent to 61 percent; Reagan from 51 percent to 59 percent; Clinton from 43 percent to 49 percent; George W. Bush from 48 percent to 51 percent.

These numbers suggest that an essential feature of successful presidents is that they find ways to broaden their coalitions. Doing the opposite—pursuing policies which shed support, but keep just enough of it to maintain a majority—is a very difficult needle to thread. How difficult? FDR in 1940 was the first president to do it since Andrew Jackson in 1832. And he had the Great Depression and World War II working in his favor and was starting from the second-highest popular-vote margin ever recorded.

Whatever one thinks of Obama's political future, it is difficult to imagine him getting more than the 53 percent of the vote he commanded in 2008. For one thing, Obama's first campaign was designed to allow him to be all things to all people. Almost by definition, his appeal cannot be broader than it was two years ago. And for another, Obama's legislative agenda has dismantled his coalition with dazzling efficiency. He has lost support in every conceivable subgroup—from young voters to old, among both liberals and conservatives, among high school grads, college grads, and postgraduate professionals, too.

In order to win reelection, Obama must either dramatically reconfigure his presidency or titrate his loss of support in a manner so precise that only two American presidents have ever pulled it off. It's difficult to tell which would be the tougher trick.

The other possibility, of course, is that he's toast. ♦

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Tanned, Rested, and Ready

John Boehner and the House Republicans plot their moves. BY FRED BARNES

John Boehner's favorite line during the election campaign was that he's not Nancy Pelosi. That was hardly breaking news. What's meaningful now, with Boehner soon to become House speaker, is that he's not Newt Gingrich or Tom DeLay either.

This matters all the more with Barack Obama in the White House. Obama needs a Republican foil, a villain to portray as the personification of all that's cruel and uncaring in politics. For several weeks before the election, he targeted Boehner, dwelling on a now-forgotten comment the Republican leader had made. It didn't work, and Obama moved on in search of other enemies.

John Boehner

But the White House still regards Boehner as potential prey. He's not as smart as the president and his aides, or so they think. Which means they probably can't resist going after him again. They're likely to be disappointed. Boehner has learned from the mistakes of his predecessors.

What exactly has he learned? The overriding lesson from the Gingrich era is that you can't govern from Capitol Hill. It's self-destructive even to try. Another danger to be avoided is allowing oneself, as Republican leader, to become the center of attention in Washington. Gingrich did. Boehner won't.

He understands it's "not about him," I'm told by a Boehner ally. He's not a visionary like Gingrich, but that's not required of a speaker. Political skill and the ability to get your agenda enacted is. A small ego helps, the smaller, the better.

Boehner sounds disarmingly deferential toward the president. "While our new majority will serve as your voice in the people's House," he told supporters on Election Night, "we must remember it's the president who sets the agenda for our government." That wasn't the Gingrich approach.

Nor does Boehner intend to have a list of things that must be accomplished in a specific number of days. The Pledge to America is different from Gingrich's Contract with America. It's an expression of Republican principles with two important promises attached. One is to cut $100 billion from discretionary spending in year one, and more later. The other is to have a vote on repeal of Obamacare. And there will be one, followed by votes to kill separate parts of the health care law, including the individual mandate.

When DeLay was de facto leader of House Republicans—Denny Hastert was speaker—he was seduced by the entrenched culture of spending in Congress. He promoted earmarks to aid Republicans in securing their House seats, a tactic that famously failed in 2006. Boehner, in contrast, wants to take advantage of the current, though possibly short-lived, culture of spending cuts. As for ear-

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marks, they're in their death throes. Boehner opposes them. More revealing is that the two Republicans competing to head the appropriations committee—Jerry Lewis of California and Hal Rogers of Kentucky—are suddenly in the anti-earmarks camp. They're courting Boehner, who will select the new chairman.

Boehner's accomplice on spending cuts, Paul Ryan, knows more about the budget than anyone else on Capitol Hill. "Can we cut $100 billion?" he says. "You bet we can. It's not all that difficult." If Republicans balk, "let me introduce them to the new freshman class," Ryan says. Most of the 80-plus new members are spending hawks.

As chairman of the budget committee, Ryan will write the budget next year. That's not all. The Republican strategy is to approve a series of individual spending cuts in the House and send one a week to the Senate. Should Majority Leader Harry Reid refuse to allow a vote, Republicans intend to use an arcane Senate rule to bring them to the floor, forcing a vote.

Would Republicans do this to embarrass Reid and Democrats? You're darned right they would. On Election Night, Reid pompously declared Republicans must stop simply opposing Democratic bills and offer alternatives. But Republicans have been proposing alternative policies all along. Reid has ignored them, treating input from Republicans as impudent.

And who knows? The Senate may approve some of those alternatives, spending cuts especially. Eleven Democrats whose seats are up in 2012 come from conservative-leaning states or states that swerved to the right in last week's election. They may experience a change of heart and start looking favorably on frugality.

The goal of Republicans in all this is modest but realistic. It's to keep the focus on issues, not personalities, and create a favorable climate for the election of a Republican president in 2012. Their seriousness is reinforced by the fact that Boehner isn't jockeying to be a presidential candidate himself.

Boehner may begin to appear more presidential than Obama. Since the president has alienated the business and entrepreneurial class, he's unable to provide the sense of certainty about an economy free of tax increases and what Boehner calls "job-killing" legislation and regulations. But when Boehner vows there will be no energy tax, no card check, no cap and trade global warming bill, and a relentless effort to dismantle Obamacare, the new speaker will have credibility.

Soon Republicans will confront a problem that's off their radar at the moment. Their drive to prevent tax hikes, pare spending, reduce the deficit, and block bureaucrats from issuing health care and financial industry regulations is bound to have a salutary effect on the economy. Obama will claim credit, and no doubt the media will go along.

The president is too ideologically rigid to take these steps himself. But that doesn't matter. We've seen this movie before. In 1996, President Clinton twice vetoed a Republican welfare reform bill. Bob Dole, then the Republican presidential nominee, was poised to exploit the welfare issue against Clinton. But Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott insisted on giving Clinton a third crack at the bill. He signed it. And Dole's presidential chances died. ♦

Saudi Arabia's Iraq Policy

Confused and counterproductive.

BY TONY BADRAN

Last week, the Saudi monarch King Abdullah extended a public invitation to Iraq's president and all its parliamentary coalitions to come to Saudi Arabia in order to hold talks and reach an agreement over the formation of Iraq's government. The timing of this surprising move suggests that Riyadh may have finally realized—perhaps with U.S. prodding—that its disastrous Iraq policy has hit a dead end.

The king's offer comes as a response to perceived Iranian primacy in Baghdad, especially after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's recent visit there. The Saudis' assessment of Iranian power in Baghdad is somewhat crude and simplistic. However, they are correct that the Obama administration has projected an unmistakable sense of indifference to Iraq that has allowed others to fill the vacuum. Worse yet, it is not just American adversaries, like Iran, who have taken steps detrimental to U.S. interests in Iraq, but clients like Saudi Arabia have done so as well. Blame this ugly state of affairs on the Iraq Study Group.

Long before the surge turned U.S. fortunes around in Iraq, Washington's foreign policy establishment counseled retreat. The members of the bipartisan committee chaired by Lee Hamilton and James Baker known as the Iraq Study Group distilled their collective wisdom into a 2006 report with several key recommendations. Among others, the ISG report advised the Bush White House to renew the Arab-Israeli peace process, engage Syria and Iran and, in order to prepare the way for an American withdrawal, reach out to regional states, and offer them a stake in Iraq's future.

What we are now seeing in Iraq is how this disastrous recommendation is playing out. With the current White House unable to chart any

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coherent strategy in Iraq other than to make good on a campaign promise to withdraw, the Obama administration is running on ISG autopilot.

Under this new American dispensation, where Iraq's neighbors are invited to have a say in Baghdad's political wrangling, some regional states are doing well while others are flailing. Iran has plotted a realistic Iraq strategy that has taken full advantage of Washington's flagging attention, while Saudi Arabia has failed to come to terms with the new Iraqi order and its balance of power. The Saudis are consumed by fear of Iranian expansion, and view the Iraqi Shiite political class as nothing but Iranian assets and facilitators of Iran's influence over post-American Iraq. In particular, they have been unwilling to work with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Prior to the March elections, Maliki had tried to reach out to Riyadh but was constantly rebuffed. The Saudis made it clear that they would not normalize relations with Iraq under Maliki. Instead, they sought to undermine him while backing former interim prime minister Ayad Allawi. Here the Saudis made common cause with the Syrians, whose ostensible support of Allawi gave Riyadh the belief that Damascus could be enlisted to help counterbalance Iranian influence in Iraq. This hope was misguided. Syria had no political leverage in Iraq aside from the terrorism it sponsored there, and which it used to try to extract concessions from both Washington and the Iraqi government. With the Obama administration focused on withdrawal, rather than protecting the American investment in Iraq, Syria embarked on a campaign of terror in late August 2009 that was aimed explicitly at destroying Maliki's political fortunes.

Iraq's Nouri al-Maliki (right) in Cairo with Amr Moussa of the Arab League

NEWSCOM

Riyadh's decisions showed how badly they misread the political situation. Maliki, as the incumbent, was always the favorite to return to office, having had years to build up his power base through patronage and administrative appointments. Allawi's chances, on the other hand, were always poor. While his list barely edged ahead of Maliki's, he personally received fewer votes than Maliki, which, coupled with the fact that his list was predominantly Sunni, meant that he was a long shot. The Syrians understood as much, which is why Damascus shifted its position in September and pulled the rug out from under Riyadh. Allawi, the Syrians concluded, could not be Iraq's next premier, and the only real option was Maliki.

The Saudis had always believed that Maliki was Iran's primary choice for prime minister, but this was yet another inaccurate Saudi assessment. In fact, Maliki had irked the Iranians by refusing to join the broad Shiite umbrella coalition that included Iran's closest allies. He had sought, moreover, to marginalize his opponents—and Iran's friends—and had even moved militarily against Moktada al-Sadr, Iran's most formidable asset in Iraq. By trying to undermine Maliki, the Saudis were doing Iran a favor. A weakened Maliki, the Iranians calculated, could not risk it on his own and would be forced to come back under their tent.

In stark contrast to the Saudis, the Iranians have played their hand in Iraq pragmatically. They knew that none of their Shiite friends had a serious shot at challenging Maliki, so they figured that it was better to stick with him and find a way to plant Sadr in his cabinet. Iran sees Sadr as its long-term investment—head of a political and military movement similar to its Lebanese asset, Hezbollah—and with him in Maliki's coalition, Tehran would have a seat in the cabinet. From that perch, the Iranians believe that they would be able to pressure the government on their key issues of concern, like security appointments and U.S. basing rights in Iraq.

Either the Obama administration did not appreciate the damage the Saudis were doing, or, even worse, were not able to lean on Riyadh to fall in line. In either case, it is the end result of the magical thinking behind the ISG report. Washington's authority regarding Iraq is now diminished because ISG strategy is premised on a fundamental misconception—if all of Washington's efforts were directed toward the goal of withdrawing, none of Iraq's neighbors would take the American bargaining position seriously. If we wanted to give everyone else in the region a stake in Iraq, the region saw it otherwise—that we were abandoning our own stake and getting nothing in return. ♦

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It Was Rubio's Tuesday

The most important freshman senator

Marco Rubio with his wife, Jeanette, and their children, celebrating his victory on Election Night

NEWSCOM

By Stephen F. Hayes

Tampa

At 8:30 A.M. on Sunday, October 24, Marco Rubio sat in a nondescript classroom at the University of South Florida, seemingly staring miles beyond the wall in front of him. The CNN debate, the fifth between the three Senate candidates from Florida and the first to be broadcast nationally, would begin before a live audience in half an hour. Rubio was the picture of concentration, like a professional athlete before a big game—his jaw clenched, his head bobbing in rhythm to the music coming from the white headphones attached to his iPod. Some research suggests that classical music can stimulate higher brain function and aid concentration. But the thumping bass, audible from my seat about 10 feet away, suggested Rubio wasn't listening to Joseph Haydn.

After 20 minutes, the candidate was summoned to the stage. He removed the headphones and left his iPod on the table. I asked two of Rubio's top aides—Albert Martinez, who handled communications for Rubio during his rise in Florida politics and served as a consultant on the Senate race, and Alex Burgos, the communications director on the Senate campaign—what Rubio listened to in order to get himself in the right frame of mind for such a

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big moment. Burgos guessed it was probably Tupac. Martinez thought maybe NWA. Rubio, 39, like so many men his age, is a closet fan of gangsta rap.

Martinez picked up the iPod, glanced at the last tune played, and shook his head. "I don't believe this," he said, laughing. It wasn't gangsta rap, but club music. Rubio, who had spent three hours in debate prep the previous afternoon, had been gathering his final pre-debate thoughts to "Sexy Bitch," by French DJ David Guetta and rapper Akon.

Judging by his performance, it worked. Rubio's team had anticipated that Governor Charlie Crist, trailing in the polls, would come after him hard. And though Crist started the debate sticking to substance, he seemed to lose his cool with just a few minutes remaining. The tanned governor sputtered out a long and incoherent attack on Rubio and his use of a Republican party credit card earlier in the decade. Rubio had prepared a careful response—one that would have him briefly expressing disappointment that Crist was once again resorting to "personal attacks" while refusing to talk about debt and deficits, the issues voters cared about most.

But as he listened to Crist's bizarre rant, Rubio had another thought. He looked at Crist with a mixture of amusement and pity. "I've never had a heckler *at* the debate," he said. "I've always had them in the audience."

The audience erupted with laughter, then applause. With two lines, Rubio had neutralized the attack and reduced the sitting governor to a crazy man in a crowd.

Rubio looked at Crist with a mixture of amusement and pity. 'I've never had a heckler *at* the debate,' he said. 'I've always had them in the audience.' The audience erupted with laughter, then applause. Rubio had neutralized the attack.

Two days later, Rubio walked to the end of the Continental terminal at Miami International Airport for a morning flight to Orlando. Dressed casually in an untucked navy blue oxford, dark blue jeans, and black shoes, he showed no sign of nervousness just hours before the sixth and final three-way debate of the race.

Rubio took a seat at the gate next to his wife, Jeanette, a stunning former Miami Dolphins cheerleader who looks like she just walked off the field despite having given birth to four kids in the last ten years. She filled him in on news from that morning. Her car had been broken into at the kids' school—a window smashed by someone who had seen her purse on the front seat. She was annoyed at the inconvenience but took delight in having emptied the inexpensive purse moments before it was stolen. Rubio spoke on the phone with the mechanic, who seemed to have no idea that he was talking to Florida's next senator and a man conservatives are already talking about as presidential material. A new window for the car would take three weeks because it had to be shipped from overseas. Oh well.

Rubio turned his attention to more important matters. "Do you know if there's a Men's Wearhouse near our hotel?" he asked his body guy, Orlando "Landi" Cicilia. Rubio's carry-on contained two suits he had bought at the discount clothier, and with the enthusiasm of a lottery winner he explained that the store would press any suits purchased there at no charge. He dropped his voice an octave. "You're going to like the way you look," he said, cracking himself up. "I guarantee it."

Six hours later, Rubio was pacing in a small conference room at WESH-TV, the NBC affiliate in Orlando. His top advisers were seated around a small table, occasionally lobbing questions at the candidate.

His wife spoke up. "It's your last debate. How do you feel?"

"I feel least nervous, which is probably not a good thing," he said.

"Let's go over your opening and closing statements again," said Todd Harris, a senior adviser who had run Rubio's debate prep team for months. "They were the shakiest ever earlier this afternoon."

Everyone laughed, including Rubio. "Thanks, man. Appreciate that vote of confidence. What about bucking up the candidate before the big debate?"

Harris clicked the stopwatch and Rubio launched into his open, thanking Floridians for watching, reminding them of the stakes and then asking them for their vote. Harris clicked the stopwatch again when he finished.

"How long?" Rubio wondered. He had a minute for the real thing.

"Fifty-six seconds," said Harris. "That was great."

David Gregory, host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, appeared on a muted television in the corner of the room, giving a preview of the debate to a local anchor. Rubio called for volume. Gregory praised the candidates for doing so many debates and said he wanted to make sure the candidates gave substantive answers to the questions of most immediate concern to Floridians.

It was exactly what the Rubio team wanted to hear. The polls showed them a dozen points ahead of Crist, a Republican who turned independent when it became clear he would lose the GOP primary. Rubio wanted the final debate to be either substantive or boring. Or both.

"I'm just going to wonk out," he said.

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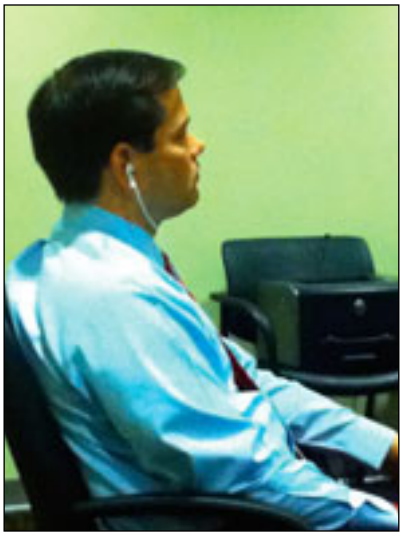
Harris thought Gregory would focus on the economy and Florida's much-publicized mortgage problems. He knew that Gregory understood the issue well because his wife had worked at Fannie Mae. And Harris told Rubio that Gregory, being a well-known national journalist, would try to demonstrate his local knowledge. Harris, along with Martinez, Burgos, and Julio Rebull, a longtime friend and key adviser to Rubio, had peppered the candidate with questions on the issue earlier that afternoon. When a producer gave Rubio a five-minute warning, Harris returned to the foreclosure issue, and they worked on his answer until it was time for the debate to begin.

Rubio gave the opening statement just as he had in the conference room, and after the other candidates spoke, Gregory turned to questions.

"I want to start with what was single-handedly responsible for the collapse of the economy, and that was the foreclosure crisis. I spent some time going through the papers today and I see some pretty tough numbers," Gregory said, before reading several local headlines. "Speaker Rubio, Americans have lost $6 trillion. The centerpiece of their savings and their lives wiped away when equity prices in their homes evaporated in this collapse. The Obama administration has frankly not done very much to mitigate that problem. The foreclosure problem continues—in Florida and around the nation. What would you do to solve the foreclosure problem?"



Debate prep, October 24

"Let's analyze this in three parts," he began. Rubio said the problem started with bad housing policy and was exacerbated by bad monetary policy. He allowed that there are no easy answers, but argued that the Obama administration's solutions haven't worked.

Then he wonked out.

"The 1.3 million temporary workouts—of those, over half have defaulted," he said. Gregory interjected. "Those are called mortgage modifications." Rubio drew a distinction. "But they're temporary mortgage modifications. There have been 500,000 permanent [modifications], and we just found out yesterday that of the 500,000 permanent, 11 percent of those have defaulted. So it's clear that these plans haven't worked largely because they're focused on lowering the interest rates or pushing the period of the loan back. So for example, if you owed five months, they just added five months to the back of the loan."

It was a nearly perfect answer. Gregory seemed determined to grill each of the three candidates *Meet-the-Press* style once in the hourlong debate. Rubio had passed his test.

Gregory turned to Crist. The governor had run a shamelessly demagogic ad on Social Security, suggesting that Rubio would take benefits away from seniors already receiving them. Gregory briefly walked Crist through the uncomfortable math of Social Security solvency and pressed him for details of his plan to save it. Crist fixed his face in a way to convey sincerity and seriousness. "I'm an optimistic person." The staff in the Rubio holding room exploded with laughter. The other candidates at the table with Crist snickered.

If the race hadn't already been over, it was now. And after a week of high drama—filled with revelations that former President Bill Clinton was leaning on the third candidate, Democrat Kendrick Meek, to drop out, at the behest of Crist and with the encouragement of the White House—voters made it official, giving Rubio nearly 50 percent of the votes cast. His eloquent victory speech won widespread praise. And within hours of his election to the Senate, there was abundant speculation that he would soon be on a Republican presidential ticket.

None of this was inevitable.

Eighteen months earlier, Rubio had driven himself around the state doing "fundraisers" that generated so little cash they barely covered his expenses. In the first poll measuring support for possible Senate candidates, Rubio registered 3 percent. In the spring of 2009, when Florida's then-popular governor announced that he was joining the race, the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) immediately pledged its "full support" for Crist. Top Republicans in Florida and Washington rushed to endorse Crist and publicly urged—while privately demanding—that Rubio quit the race. Crist outraised Rubio by more than ten to one in the first quarter they were both in the race, and Rubio seriously considered dropping out.

But Rubio stayed in, and several things helped him gain momentum—a guerrilla ad campaign that defined Crist at the outset, crucial early endorsements from Mike Huckabee and Jim DeMint, a well-timed cover story in *National Review*, and an unconventional low-dollar fundraising strategy. The most important factors were the candidate and his message.

While most establishment Republicans were seeking to expand the party and recruit moderate candidates, Rubio wanted to debate the direction of the party. And while many other Republican candidates shaped their message

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to appeal to Tea Party conservatives, Rubio didn't have to. He had been a Tea Party conservative long before the Tea Party was born.

Marco Rubio had thought about running for the Senate in the same way that pretty much everyone in a state legislature does: It was an aspiration but not an immediate goal.

When he met with former Florida governor Jeb Bush in December 2008, Rubio left the conversation believing that Bush intended to run for the seat. The two men had become close over the previous decade, when Rubio, serving in the Florida House of Representatives, was a strong legislative ally of Governor Bush. If Bush was running, Rubio wasn't. The two men spoke again in January, and Bush told Rubio that he had decided against a run. Bush encouraged Rubio to consider entering the race. It didn't take much convincing.

On January 23, Rubio met with Heath Thompson and Malorie Miller, political consultants from the respected Dallas-based firm Scott Howell and Company. Miller had known Rubio from her days working in the Florida legislature, and she wanted to work for Rubio if he decided to run. They pitched him informally and began talking regularly with Rebull, Rubio's longtime confidant and a sharp South Florida Republican and former vice president of the Florida Marlins.

While other Republican candidates shaped their message to appeal to Tea Party conservatives, Rubio didn't have to. He had been a Tea Party conservative long before the Tea Party was born.

On February 10, 2009, Barack Obama came to Fort Myers to promote his stimulus package, which was on the verge of passage. Governor Crist appeared with Obama. Like many politicians, Crist has long been a man of malleable principles. (In the 2008 presidential contest, he had all but assured Rudy Giuliani of an endorsement, a key component of Giuliani's Florida-first strategy. But as the Florida primary neared, Giuliani was down in the polls, and John McCain was beginning to look like the nominee. Crist endorsed McCain just days before the primary.)

When Obama came to Florida, his favorable rating was at nearly 70 percent. And while Republicans in Washington opposed the stimulus, they trained their attacks on Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi, rarely using Obama's name in their critique of his plan.

Crist embraced the $787 billion proposal and literally hugged the popular president who had come to sell it. The crowd chanted "Yes We Can!" as Crist introduced Obama. "We know it's that important that we pass a stimulus package. . . . This is not about partisan politics. This is about rising above that, helping America, and reigniting our economy."

It may not have been about partisan politics, but Crist's appearance was surely about politics. Within weeks Florida politicos were buzzing about the prospect that Crist would forgo a reelection bid to run for the Senate. Crist did not deny the reports and said he'd make a final decision on his future after the Florida legislative session ended in May. The Obama/Crist event—Rubio's campaign team calls it simply "Fort Myers"—would prove to be an important moment.

Rubio spent most of the spring traveling the state and raising money. On May 5, he made his formal announcement. "Races of this magnitude are decided by who presents a clearer picture of the future, and I intend to do that," he said. And in a shot at Crist, who was expected to announce his own candidacy, Rubio said: "The more Republicans become less distinguishable from Democrats, the less people will vote for Republicans. I don't agree with the notion that to grow our party we need to become more like Democrats."

Crist announced a week later. "Here in Florida, we've shown that when we put people first and work together, much can be accomplished, and I intend to bring that same approach to Washington."

Rubio's ad team—Harris, Thompson, and Miller—had been prepared for Crist's announcement and immediately released a web ad that sought to define the choice for Florida Republicans. Over kaleidoscopic images swirling on the screen a narrator intones: "An election coming into focus. A choice for Florida's future. Some politicians support trillions in reckless spending, borrowed money from China and the Middle East, mountains of debt for our children, and a terrible threat to a fragile economy." With ominous music in the background, the blurry photo of Crist with Obama comes into focus. "Today, too many politicians embrace Washington's same old broken ways. But this time, there is a leader who won't. Let the debate begin." As the ad ends, "Marco2010" flashes on the screen.

It was a tough way to start, but they had no choice. The most recent Quinnipiac poll showed Crist leading 54-8 percent. And Rubio was eager for a policy confrontation. When his ad team first sent him the spot several days earlier, he responded via email.

> Man, let me tell you guys something. I just ran this on my computer and three things happened. 1. I got chills. 2. My wife and children painted themselves up in blue face like

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Braveheart. 3. I went to the closet and got out my costume from Gladiator and I could hear the crowd chant: "Maximus! Maximus!"

Let's go kill the emperor! I love it.

Do we need a small buy to push this out? Do I need to sell my car and take out a second mortgage to pay for a bigger buy?

Within hours of Crist's announcement, the National Republican Senatorial Committee pledged its backing. "While I believe Marco Rubio has a very bright future within the Republican party, Charlie Crist is the best candidate in 2010 to ensure that we maintain the checks and balances that Floridians deserve in the United States Senate," said NRSC chairman Senator John Cornyn. "Governor Crist is a dedicated public servant and a dynamic leader, and the NRSC will provide our full support to ensure that he is elected the next United States senator from Florida."

It was a big blow. "The senatorial committee endorsed him within minutes of his announcement," Rubio recalled recently. "Followed by a flood of other people." They included former Florida senator Mel Martinez, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, Senator John McCain, and Representatives Mario and Lincoln Diaz-Balart, who are, like Rubio, Cuban-Americans. Dozens of Florida Republicans jumped aboard the Crist bandwagon, eager to be on the winning team. Rubio won the endorsement of Mike Huckabee, but most people dismissed it as payback; Rubio had endorsed Huckabee in 2007.

Rubio had known the NRSC endorsement was coming. Cornyn had reached out to Jeb Bush the previous night to give him a heads up, and, coincidentally, Rubio had a meeting scheduled with Cornyn in Washington on the day that Crist announced. "I went over to the senatorial committee, and Senator Cornyn was gracious enough to come over from the Capitol to the senatorial committee to explain to me their decision and their rationale. It was a very respectful meeting. I told them they were wrong. I told them that I was going to win and that they would be shocked in a year."

Rubio left the NRSC headquarters and walked three blocks to the Russell Senate Office Building for his next meeting. Heath Thompson, one of the political consultants who had met with Rubio back in January, was now working for the candidate. He had set up a meeting for Rubio with one of his previous clients, Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina.

DeMint's staff had seen some YouTube videos of past Rubio speeches but DeMint knew very little about him. DeMint pressed Rubio about his commitment to the race. In the days before Crist's announcement, Rubio had faced intense pressure to drop out of the race to clear the field for the more "electable" candidate.

Rubio told DeMint and his staff that he was in the race for the duration, and he did so in a manner that left a strong impression. Rubio told DeMint that his parents had come from Cuba seeking a better life. His parents had worked in the hospitality industry. It wasn't glamorous, but they understood that the harder they worked the more opportunities they could provide for their four children. It hadn't been this way in Cuba, even before the revolution, and Rubio explained, with great passion, that he felt a moral obligation to do whatever he could to make sure his children had the same opportunities. "I remember my eyes welling up," says DeMint. Others in the room remember the same thing. "You get pretty hardened in Washington. But I thought, this guy is for real. We don't meet many people like him in Washington." It was a preview of the sunny conservatism that Rubio would come to embody on the campaign trail.

DeMint was angry that the NRSC had supported Crist. "If you listen to what the moderates have said—we need youth, we need minorities, we need women. And here we have this young Cuban American who had proved himself as speaker of the House in Florida. And the committee was dissing him and ignoring him."

One month later, with continuing calls for Rubio to drop out, DeMint offered his endorsement. "This gave me some hope," says DeMint. "We could recruit some people and help some people who could help turn this country around."

DeMint's statement endorsing Rubio was a mixture of enthusiasm and frustration.

For months now, Republicans have been looking around, asking everyone they meet who our next leaders will be. And somehow, inexplicably, many of us have grown blind to the diamonds all around us. There are already many young, conservative leaders ready to fight for freedom in Washington and in state capitals all around the country. But we'll never find them if we only look for well-known politicians or choose our party's direction based on the latest polls instead of timeless principles.

Rubio says the endorsement was critical, maybe campaign-saving. "The fact that a sitting U.S. senator would endorse somebody who had only raised $250,000—long-term it's proven to be a lot of support. But at the beginning it was a little dose of oxygen—just enough to keep you breathing for another couple of weeks."

Then, another setback. The July fundraising reports were devastating. Crist posted a $4.3 million quarter; Rubio had raised a paltry $340,000 over the same period. The pressure on Rubio to get out of the race increased.

"That took us off-balance a little bit," Rubio recalls. "I got a lot of conflicting advice from people about whether this was the right thing to do, people saying, 'You should run for something else.'"

The local media began to treat Rubio dismissively. The *St. Petersburg Times* declared Crist its "Winner of the Week" and wrote:

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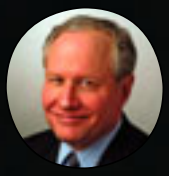

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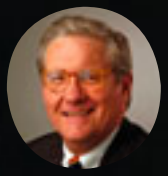

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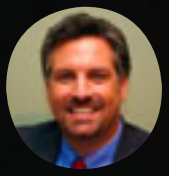

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> Raising a whopping $4.3 million for his Republican Senate campaign, Crist surely quelled what had been the growing buzz about the threat from Republican Marco Rubio. As much as we relish covering a fight for the soul of the GOP, no candidate can use Twitter to overcome a 30-point deficit in the polls and eight-to-one financial disadvantage.

Julio Rebull, who is as close to Rubio as anyone in the campaign, considered telling his friend to quit. "I thought to myself: Is this viable for Marco to go forward with this? Should I just listen, or should I just tell him, 'It's time to fight this battle another day.'" Top Republicans in the state once again told Rubio to run for attorney general.

As he weighed his options the most compelling question, he says, came from his wife, who asked: "Do you want to be attorney general or do you want to be a senator?" The question answered itself.

Rubio had to do two things to survive—raise more money and simplify his message.

Rubio recalls his thinking: "We have August and we have September. We have two months to raise—to have a successful fundraising quarter that shows growth. I felt if I didn't get to at least $750,000 by the end of September—in that quarter—then the media would start to stop covering us. People would stop taking us seriously. So if we do that, then I think we're in the game. And if we don't do that, then it's just not going to happen."

Rubio, Charlie Crist, and Kendrick Meek greet each other before a debate.

NEWSCOM

Rubio strategists Harris and Thompson were brutally direct in a memo to the candidate on July 10, 2009. "The hard truth is that no one outside of a small number of activists cares about you right now as a stand-alone candidate. And our 2nd quarter fundraising numbers will make many care even less." The only plausible path to victory was for Rubio to become the Anti-Crist, and the most important point of contrast would be support for the Obama agenda. Harris and Thompson wrote:

> Every communication from the campaign, from the biggest speeches and interviews to the lowliest Twitter message and blog post should revolve around this theme: I am running for Senate because Washington needs more leaders who will stand up to President Obama's liberal policies, not embrace them. . . . I will be a check on Obama's agenda, not a rubber stamp. And I will fight for what's right, not just what's popular.

Rubio posted $1 million in October. "I think the notion for the pundits was: 'Well, now there's a real race in Florida.' That was important because those are the metrics that people who follow politics understand," says Rubio. Once he was a credible candidate, and Charlie Crist was no longer inevitable, the race turned quickly.

Over the course of the six months that followed, Rubio drove the contrast with Crist by running against Barack Obama. In October, a Quinnipiac poll showed Crist leading 50-35 percent in a head-to-head matchup. By April, Rubio led 56-33 percent.

Private polling for both Republican candidates showed the same thing. Crist was losing badly. And in a year in which conservatives were once again ascendant, he stood little chance of winning the GOP primary in August.

There had been rumors for months that Crist would leave the party to run as an independent. Crist denied the claims in a head-to-head primary debate on *Fox News Sunday* on March 28, 2010. But Rubio didn't believe him. "Chris Wallace pressed him about as hard as you could press somebody," says Rubio. "I was sitting next to him and I can tell you, his mouth was saying one thing and his body was saying something else."

It took a month. On the morning of April 28, Crist spoke to his pollster with *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Alex Leary in the room. A poll taken earlier in the week showed Crist winning a three-way race if he were to drop out of the Republican primary and run as an independent—36 percent for Crist, 28 for Rubio, and 23 for Democrat Meek. The following day Crist announced that he would run as an independent.

That poll would prove to be a highwater mark for Crist, who would later claim that he would have run as an independent even if he'd been leading Rubio by 20 points. Although Crist enjoyed a brief spike when the BP oil spill once again thrust him into a very public leadership role,

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his poll numbers trended downward through the final days of the campaign.

Marco Rubio has gotten as much positive national media attention as any Senate candidate since, well, Barack Obama. There is a natural inclination to think that he has been overhyped. That's certainly the assumption I took with me to Florida in late September for the first of two five-day stints with his campaign.

It was wrong.

If anything, Rubio is underrated. Some Democrats seem to understand this. That fact, probably more than anything else, explains why the White House encouraged Bill Clinton as early as last spring to use his influence to get Meek out of the race and clear the way for Charlie Crist to run as a Democrat.

No Republican in the country offers a more compelling defense of American exceptionalism and a more powerful indictment of the Obama administration than Marco Rubio. He has had lots of practice. He ran against Obama more than he ran against either of his two opponents. On the first full day I spent with him, Rubio never once mentioned Meek, and he spoke about Charlie Crist only when responding to a question—this in a day that included a lunchtime speech at a fundraiser with Mitt Romney, a lengthy debate prep session, and two additional speeches in Plant City that evening.

Rubio speaks extemporaneously and usually without notes. And while his remarks often cover the same broad set of issues and sometimes repeat phrases, no two speeches are ever the same. When Rubio addressed several hundred local Republicans in Plant City at the Red Rose Hotel, in a room just down from a cheesy lounge with fake stars on the ceiling, it was just another event. He had done thousands of similar events and given hundreds of similar speeches before this one. He spoke for nearly 40 minutes, and the audience listened intently to every word.

> I do not believe you have to demonize people in order to win elections. Quite frankly, I think that many of these people in Washington who are making bad policy are generally well intentioned. But I think they have two things wrong: a fundamental misunderstanding of how our economy functions and a fundamental misunderstanding of America's role in the world. And those two things are what led to these policies.
>
> Number one—The economy functions like this: Jobs are not created by politicians, they are created by people that start businesses or expand existing businesses. And the job of government is to create the environment where doing that becomes easier, not harder. Number two—America's role in the world is pretty straightforward. The world is safer and it is better when America is the strongest country in the world.
>
> These are the two principles that are at stake in our country right now. And they are as important as any issues that any generation has faced before us. We are literally fighting for whether we are going to be exceptional or not.

Rubio's background allows him to make these cutting arguments without any suggestion that Obama is somehow un-American. Many politicians understand American exceptionalism on an intellectual level, but Rubio feels it.

> In most every other country in the world, if your parents were workers, you grew up to be a worker. If your parents were employees, you grew up to be an employee. But in this country, the worker can become an owner, the employee can become an employer. It happens every single day. And that is what sets us apart. . . . I am a generation removed from something very different from this. My parents weren't born in a society like this. They were born in a place where what you were going to be when you grew up was decided for you. It all depended on who your parents were, who your grandparents were—how connected you were. . . . My dad was a bartender. I always look for the bar at these events. He stood behind that for 30-some-odd years, working events just like this. I often have told people that at events like this that my dad worked, there were two people standing behind tables, the bartender behind the bar and the speaker behind the podium. He literally worked 35 or 40 years—on New Year's Eves and holidays and late nights, into his seventies—behind the bar, so that one day his children could sit at a table at one of these events. Or even better, stand behind a podium like this.
>
> But I never remember feeling limited by any of that. Because this is a nation where anyone from anywhere can accomplish anything. I never remember feeling that because my last name ended with a vowel there was only so far I could go in life. This is an extraordinary country. And so on a personal level, what this race is about for me is whether my kids are going to get to raise their children in a country that looks like the one my parents were born in or in a country like the one that I was born in. It's literally that stark of a choice.

Rubio's promise means that the left will target him and the right will lionize him. On Election Night, as Rubio spoke in front of an array of American and Florida flags, Arianna Huffington tweeted that political strategist Matthew Dowd thought Rubio looked "like a Central American dictator." Three days later, the Republican party chose Rubio to deliver its weekly address to the nation.

Rubio's father passed away two months before he was elected to the Senate. His mother turned 80 last week. Their hard work paid off and may well yield further dividends.

"Marco Rubio is a natural leader and is likely to be a leader of our party," says DeMint. "In five years, no one will remember Jim DeMint, and Marco will be president." ♦

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If you were asked to surrender your will, would you? Probably not. But have you considered the countless times people do surrender their will each and every day? "No," you say, "I don't, and I never would!"

Richard W. Wetherill
1906-1989

Well, think about how you surrender your will to the laws of nature. Do you argue with gravity, ignore friction, grab a live wire, lean to the left turning right?

People have learned to surrender to creation's natural laws, but there is a law of nature that virtually everybody has been ignoring.

While people eagerly surrender to familiar laws such as gravity and friction, sometimes a mistake is made. For example, if they lose their balance by slipping on a wet surface, everybody instinctively struggles to conform to the appropriate natural laws.

Early in the past century, a natural ***law of behavior*** was identified by the late Richard W. Wetherill. In 1952 he presented it in the book, *Tower of Babel*.

He called it the ***law of absolute right***, and it specifies ***behavior that is rational and honest*** to replace choices based on a person's likes and dislikes, wants and don't wants, judgments and beliefs, thereby, over time, putting together his/her own plan of life.

Nature's law of absolute right states that right action gets right results, and if wrong results occur, the law was somehow disregarded.

What kinds of results are presently occurring? The news media daily report on the tragedies of international warfare, political corruption, criminal activity, economic disasters, foreclosures, and afflictions labeled "cause unknown."

You might be wondering, who thinks that conforming to a natural law could stop those wrong results?

The answer comes from persons who have surrendered their will to ***creation's law of absolute right***. They enthusiastically report right results occurring, as they drop old behavior patterns and respond rationally and honestly to whatever happens.

The nonprofit group financing this public-service message is telling people that their safety and security exist in trusting the laws of creation rather than trusting the laws and beliefs of human origin. Every natural law requires the action it calls for, thereby enabling the law to complete its rightful purpose.

That is easily observed when using gravity as an example. When people stumble and fall, they do not form criticisms of gravity. They are more likely to look around for someone or something to blame—sometimes their own carelessness.

But to achieve success and avoid failure at whatever activity or task they are engaged in, people instinctively know they must obey nature's laws of physics.

Prior to the identification of those laws, the ancients worshipped natural phenomena and/or idols. It required aeons until people identified the natural laws creating forces to guide their activities and that ***those laws expressed the will of the creator***—not to be worshipped but to be obeyed.

Thus creation's law of absolute right calls for rational and honest responses to whatever happens.

Visit our colorful Website www.alphapub.com where several natural-law essays and seven books describe the changes called for by whoever or whatever created nature's behavioral law. The material can be read, downloaded, and/or printed FREE. This public-service message is from a self-financed, nonprofit group of former students of the late Richard W. Wetherill. We are putting this information where it is available worldwide. Please help by directing others to our Website. For more information write to: The Alpha Publishing House, PO Box 255, Royersford, PA 19468.

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Impermanent Majority

The lesson of all the recent 'wave' elections

By Noemie Emery

Remember 2008, the liberal era, the "we are all socialists now" frenzy, the realignment brought about by the magic of Barack Obama, that transcendent persuader, that peerless orator, that awesome and all-around brain? Remember 2004, and *that* realignment? Each of these realignments, touted to stretch at least through the decade, lasted about seven months. The same thing for the two "realignments" before them—in 1992 and 1994—each of which was expected to settle scores for a generation. What they set the course for, instead, was a balance of power and the Perfect Tie of 2000—which set the course for two more wide and widely unlooked-for reversals of fortune, each of which took the wise by surprise. With all this in mind, we shall simply observe that as 1992, 1994, 2004, and 2008 were false dawns for their winners, the 2010 midterms tell us very little about what lies ahead. The White House, the Democrats (progressives and moderates), and the Republicans (establishment and Tea Partiers) will now begin making critical choices. The parties, and choices, are these:

THOMAS FLUHARTY

■ **The President**. Last Tuesday voters inflicted a "shellacking" on Barack Obama, to use his description. It was a massive rebuke for the one-time messiah, a blow to his psyche as well as his prospects, and thus doubly hard to absorb. Two years ago, he was the global rock star; now Democrats seem to be fleeing his embrace. His words then were magic; now they fall on deaf ears. He achieved, but his achievements were used to clobber his party. The coalition that elected him has unraveled; he draws comparisons to Hoover, not FDR, and to Carter, not Reagan. The party he leads is split and demoralized. He has revived an opposition that not long ago appeared dead. His transformational days are behind him; he will now have to get down in the trenches to survive or break even. In these conditions, he has two options: He can take the Bill Clinton route, dial down and move center, or he can take a long cruise on the River Denial. Which, can we guess, will it be? The verdict on his postelection press conference seems to be that he is choosing denial, but we still have a long time to go.

Clinton, after a similar trouncing (induced by a similar health care debacle), reinvented himself as a man of the "sensible center," triangulating between his own base and the right. He could do this because he had a centrist past to repair to (he was a Southern governor and a founding member of the Democratic Leadership Council, the group formed by the party's more moderate members after the 1984 Mondale blowout); he was never called a messiah, so his fall from grace was less bruising; and he was not an ideologue but the sort of career politician who has mere ideas as opposed to convictions, and settles for what he can get. He understood and acknowledged that he had veered to the left of the mainstream. And he was lucky in that *his* health care reform plan had never even come to a vote in the Congress, so he could bury it quietly and start life anew. Obama, however, has none of these things: He has no centrist past to go back to, as what experience he does have is in deep blue America. He is ideological. He shows no sign of realizing he veered much too far from the center, or even of knowing the center's location. And his health bill is in the middle of everything, less loved than ever, and getting more unpopular the more he defends it. He will have to spend most of his political capital for the rest of his term trying to keep it from being defunded, undermined by state governments, or otherwise torn to shreds.

Unlike Clinton, who realized he blew it, Obama seems quite happy with what he did in his half-term, and shows no inclination to change. "We were going to do the right thing, even if short-term it was unpopular," he told the *New York Times*'s Peter Baker, saying he had kept a "checklist" and "we've probably accomplished about 70 percent" of it all. Nowhere before or after the voting was there a recognition of the fact that these accomplishments set off a backlash, that people were running *against* his accomplishments. "We'd

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be misreading the election if we thought that the American people want to see us for the next two years relitigate arguments that we had over the last two years," he said the day after his shellacking. Actually, the vote was in favor of continuing litigation, which will go on until 2012.

When Clinton looked back, it was to 1980 and his traumatic loss after one term as governor, at which point he quickly repaired to the center (Hillary even colored her hair and wore dresses) and thereafter won when he worked with Republicans. When Obama looks back, he sees his astonishing rise and remarkable victory, his 53 percent mandate (as opposed to Clinton's 43 percent plurality in his first run for president), and his amazing "success" in forcing health care through Congress after Scott Brown's election had left it for dead. He may want to deny and blow off the results of the midterms—as he did the wins of Bob McDonnell, Brown, and Chris Christie—but this time he has lost not merely public opinion but the bloated congressional majorities he used to defy it and to impose his agenda. It may take this some time to sink in.

Obama is now like a fading rock star revisiting scenes of old triumphs, hoping that if he sings the same songs in the same sequence, the magic will come back again. But the midterms signal that his transformational days are over, and he will have to become transactional if he wants to survive. Too bad he looks down on Clinton and Clintonesque methods. He told Diane Sawyer earlier this year that, in effect, he would prefer to go down as himself than survive as Clinton: He would "rather be a really good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president." But he said this in January, when the prospect of losing seemed distant. What if winning like Clinton or losing like Carter is the choice? Obama's war with himself will be as engrossing as his struggle with the new Congress. And we can't guess at the outcome.

Obama is now like a fading rock star revisiting scenes of old triumphs, hoping that if he sings the same songs in the same sequence, the magic will come back again.

■ **The Democrats**. We can't guess either what will become of the Democrats, who seem despondent in two different ways. Two years ago at Grant Park, the progressive base came as close to a state of religious ecstasy as it can possibly come in this world. "One felt . . . almost invincible," wrote Michael Tomasky, "finally justified in our beleaguered beliefs . . . aware in fresh and unprecedented ways of our collective power, like mortals transformed into superheroes in the movies, realizing for the first time that they could fly." After a 40-year slog in the desert—after Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and two different Bushes oppressed them; after Carter failed them and Clinton betrayed them; after Gore and Kerry became losers and John Edwards left to spend quality time with both of his families—they had finally won the lottery, struck gold, hit the trifecta. Less than two years later it was all "a big disappointment," said Eric Alterman, who took 17,000 words to express his displeasure. "All over the country, progressives are gripped by gloom," said Paul Waldman at the *American Prospect*. "More and more it seems that we are in an age of liberal despair," Tomasky wrote in the journal *Democracy*. The stimulus was too small, the health care bill too modest, Club Gitmo too enduring, the wars still too raging.

Most of all, they were stunned by the voters' ferocious response to what seemed to them Obama's all too modest agenda: At their moment of maximum power, when the stars seemed aligned, the public took an unforeseen, vehement, swing to the right, rejecting not only the president and all his works and empty promises, but the very idea of an activist state. "The storyline is much larger than merely that the stimulus has failed. It is that government is a failure," Tomasky wrote July 18 in the *Guardian*. "The great bottom line hope back in November 2008 was that Obama was going to restore trust in government and prove it could solve problems. That hasn't happened. . . . That's not an argument about the midterm elections. It's about the party of government's *raison d'être*." The *New Republic*'s John Judis looked up from the Election Day wreckage and concluded that "the United States may have finally lost its ability to adapt politically to the systemic crises that it has periodically faced." What he may mean is that the left has lost its ability to sustain itself in power, at least for more than five months.

Across the hall, centrist Democrats are still more despondent, as they have been through an emotional wringer for the last two years. Thanks to Obama, they have been forced to the wall for things that they didn't believe in; caught in the crossfire between their party and voters; flayed by remorseless emotional blackmail in being told they would be blamed for destroying their president if they voted their conscience and interests; relieved when they thought that health care was safely disposed of; appalled when they found it had been resurrected; shocked by their leaders' indifference to their concerns and their voters; and stunned when they were told by their president, leaders, and a passel of liberal bloggers and pundits that it was their obligation and duty to die for their party by throwing themselves under the bus. "We were too deferential to our most zealous supporters," lamented former senator Evan Bayh in an Election Day op-ed for the *New York Times*. "Democrats

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over-interpreted our mandate. Talk of a 'political realignment' and a 'new progressive era' proved wishful thinking." This is an acute observation, yet when he was in office, Bayh seems to have made no effort to form a coalition with his fellow centrists to change the course of his party.

Now the centrists are told by the left that their party is better off without them, and by the voters who used to support them that by backing Obamacare they turned out to be useless. Their one ray of light is the proof they were right when they said their party had gone on a suicide mission, but this has to be a small consolation. Their problem is what they do next.

The last time they were faced with a liberal wipeout, in 1994, their president swerved to the center on his own dime and of his own volition. In 1984, when Walter Mondale barely avoided losing all 50 states to President Reagan, they responded by forming the Democratic Leadership Council, which eight years later elected Bill Clinton, but regressed badly in the following decade, when the Iraq war turned their party hard left. Joe Lieberman, who almost became vice president in 2000, lost his primary in 2006 to a pacifist challenger, won with the support of independents and Republicans, and went on to endorse John McCain. He caucuses with his old party, but most of that party detests him. Bayh, after Lieberman the most prominent centrist, left the field in despair and exhaustion. Centrist Democrats have a sizable base in terms of their voters, but a vacuum in terms of political leadership. In 1984, their party was leaderless; but they now face a president who is sure to oppose them and a congressional faction that is even more left-wing after last Tuesday's vote than before. If they want a revival, they may have to wait until Obama is gone. They are demoralized, but no more so than the Republicans were at this time two years ago. Whether they stay that way will depend on Obama and the Republicans and how they deal with each other. Which brings us to point number three.

■ **The Republicans**. The Grand Old Party has just won a great victory, but one freighted with risk. A high-speed merge must now take place, in which the Tea Party lane feeds into the GOP highway. Or, if you prefer more sanguine terms, we're seeing an emergency transfusion of fluids, in which the new blood may kill the patient, or restore him to radiant health. Democrats hope for an immune reaction that leads to a coma; Republicans, and the Tea Party, hope all goes well.

Since the Tea Party emerged early in 2009, Democrats and the press have been describing its members as bigots and crazed, but results suggest otherwise: It produced clunkers in New York and Delaware, but these were made up for by other and more solid candidates, and some possible national stars. Governors Bob McDonnell and Chris Christie have shown in the past year how well Republican pros, elected with Tea Party help, can perform. And Florida's senator-elect, Marco Rubio, a Tea Party star who may want to be president, showed broad appeal in easily winning his three-way race. Their examples show that if the transfusion works, the results could be a remarkable fusion. But we won't really know till they try.

Some claim that a Republican House now gives Obama a useful foil, but the major unknown that we have to contend with is who is the foil to whom. If Obama moves to the right, and the Congress moves to the far right, it will help Obama and Democrats; if Obama stays on the left and the Congress stays center-right, it will help the Republicans; if Obama stays left and the Congress moves to the far right, it will help no one except a third party. If Obama moves right, and Congress stays center-right, it will be good for both and for the country, but that would require Obama to compromise on health care, which looks all but impossible.

Bliss it was to be alive on that morning two years ago, but it led to some pretty bad calls. The 2008 election "brings to its close another conservative era," George Packer wrote in the *New Yorker*. "For the first time since the Johnson administration, the idea that government should take bold action . . . doesn't have to explain itself in a defensive mumble. That idea is ascendant . . . because it answers the times." "Emphatically, comprehensively, the public has turned against conservatism at home and neoconservatism abroad," trilled Hendrik Hertzberg. "The faith that unfettered markets and minimal taxes . . . will solve every domestic problem, and that . . . American arms will solve any foreign one, is dead for a generation or more." Sam Tanenhaus came out with an article (later a book) that celebrated the death of conservatism just as CNBC's Rick Santelli was shocking the moribund movement back to exuberant life. Peter Beinart (who now says Obama is a lock for his 2012 showdown) ushered in "The New Liberal Order" in an essay for *Time*: Liberalism was headed for another long run as the great "ruling creed" of the nation. "The coalition that carried Obama to victory" would last as long as that put together by Franklin D. Roosevelt. His agenda "won't divide his political coalition; it will divide the [Republicans]. . . . Reagan Democrats . . . could become tomorrow's Obama Republicans—a key component of a new liberal majority." Issues such as tax cuts would fade into irrelevance and liberals would "hold sway in Washington until Sasha and Malia have kids."

Of course, in 2006 everyone knew that 2008 was going to be about Giuliani and Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama was barely an asterisk, and outside Alaska Sarah Palin was an unknown. In light of these facts, we make no predictions. All we feel free to say of the future is that it certainly does lie ahead. ♦

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As Simple as One, Two, Three

A legislative strategy for the House Republicans

By Jeff Bergner

Republicans have won control of the House and have gained several seats in the Senate. What will the Republicans do? Will they simply nibble at the edge of big government orthodoxy, fearing that Senate inaction would doom more ambitious efforts? Or will they act, understanding that the only steps capable of reversing our slide into bankruptcy are so large as to be outside the comfort zone of the political class in Washington? Will they make good on the commitment to economic growth on which they ran and were elected?

This is a problem of political courage, to be sure. But it is also a practical political challenge. It is simply not realistic to expect a political party to act against its own interest in survival. In moments of high drama a party may act on principle against self-interest; but as a rule, it must find ways to reconcile principle and politics.

The challenge before the Republicans is to fashion a legislative agenda combining boldness and prudence, a set of principled policy reforms that commands public support. Republicans need an agenda that is both radical and popular (as opposed to the Obama agenda, which was radical and unpopular). An agenda that is more than high-sounding-yet-empty reforms to the legislative process. Only concrete actions to address the nation's problems will do. What follows is a modest proposal for squaring this circle, an agenda as simple as one, two, three.

ONE TOUGH VOTE

Pass an appropriation bill that returns nondefense discretionary spending to 2008 levels. Discretionary spending has exploded in the past two years; outlays have grown from $1.134 trillion in 2008 to $1.408 trillion in 2010, a 24 percent increase, according to the White House Office of Management and Budget. Discretionary federal spending has grown by one-fourth in the past 24 months. Even Barack Obama knows this is not sustainable. That's why his 2011 budget proposes a spending "freeze" at $1.414 trillion—a bit like stealing your neighbor's horses, then insisting that everyone should just keep what they have. A freeze is not a serious response to our budgetary problems.

If we are unable to cut deeply into spending, we cannot balance the federal budget. Even massive tax increases could not squeeze enough out of the taxpayers to do this. If we do not act promptly to cut spending, we will inevitably be forced to move to a brand new type of tax, a value added tax, to be superimposed on the income tax.

Setting the level of federal spending is essentially a legislative function, and thus more achievable than initiatives dependent on the president. It would be easier with a president willing to help. But the first step is to pass a clear Republican budget. Pass it and see which Democrats sign on.

Republicans can learn from the budget impasse in 1995. Here are a few tips:

- Roll all spending for fiscal year 2011, including defense, into one bill. Do not let Democrats have separate votes on defense and homeland security spending. Given the trend toward large continuing resolutions in recent years, this shouldn't be too hard.
- Do it with fanfare. Call it the "We're all in this together, anti-bailout, anti-incumbent, anti-lobbyist, anti-special pleading, anti-Washington, save the country from bankruptcy" bill of 2011.
- Treat it like a national referendum. Many Americans are living on less than they earned last year—many families, businesses, localities, and states. Are we to suppose that only Washington cannot do this? Bring in the talk show hosts. Nationalize the issue. Offset the president's bully pulpit.
- Include a rescission of unspent funds from the unpopular economic stimulus bill.
- Be prepared for blowback. You will be called "heart-

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less" and "dangerous" and worse. You will be accused of "using a meat cleaver when a scalpel is needed." This is the standard Democratic game. But you will be called the same if you try to cut current spending by a dime. You will be criticized anyway; why not take a principled stand?

TWO POLICY FIXES

Repeal health care reform. Much ink has been spilled in conservative circles about whether to repeal Obamacare whole or to target for repeal only such (small) provisions as could make it through the legislative process. Here again is the tension between principle (repeal it all) and prudence (Obama will veto a repeal; take what small steps you can). The answer is: Do both. Pass a wholesale repeal of Obamacare, which polls show enjoys majority support in the country. Put down a marker. Make clear that liberal legislation is not irrevocable. Then go to work on ways to pick it apart. De-fund it, defer it, repeal the new tax increases, end the legal mandate to buy health insurance, permit interstate competition, offer new options for health savings accounts, and enable the states to take more steps on their own. Do it all, in the knowledge that there is popular support for every bit of this.

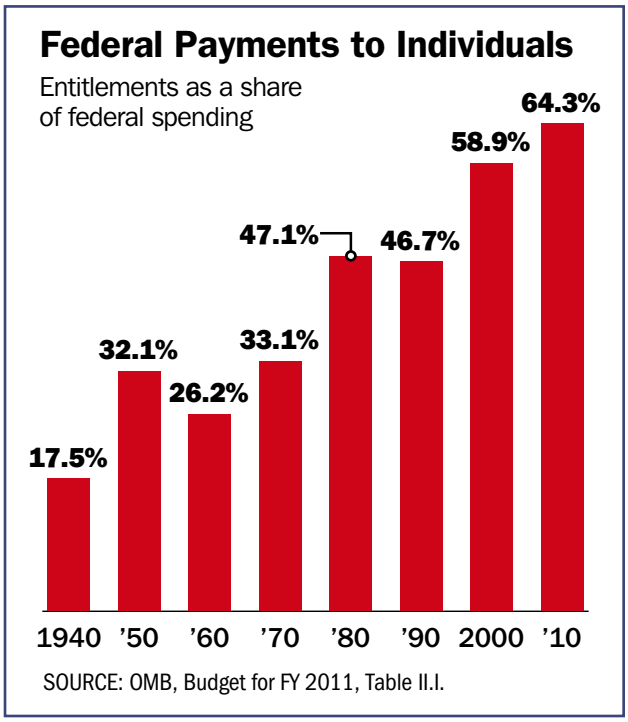
Pass legislation in 2011 to mandate the closure of our borders to illegal immigration. This step has around 70 percent support from the American people. It is wildly popular. Still, anyone attempting it will be told that the long-term future of the party is at stake. Do not believe it. Explain to people that this is in fact the only practical way to begin to address the issue of the roughly 11 million illegal immigrants who are already in the country. Tell some basic truths about illegal immigration:

- Illegal immigrants who live here are not now, or ever, going to be deported en masse.
- What is holding back the creation of a pathway to permanent legal residence, or even citizenship, for these illegal immigrants is the very demand for "comprehensive legislation." We need to bound the problem before we can fix it. To quote the president, we need to "plug the damn hole."
- America can find a reasonable way to deal with illegal immigrants who are already here. What Americans can't accept is an open-ended commitment to allow illegal immigrants to continue to come here without limit.

Make a commitment that within two years of effectively ending illegal immigration, Republicans will bring forward a sensible and humane plan to deal with illegal immigrants already living in this country. Here lies the only possible solution. Republicans can make it happen. If they do, they can be the electoral beneficiaries of immigration reform in both the short and long terms.

THREE STRUCTURAL REFORMS

Pass a pro-growth tax reform bill in 2012. This will be extremely popular. Congressional Democrats—and the president—will oppose it at their peril in an election year. Simplify and reduce tax rates for individuals; cut the corporate tax rate to a level competitive with other advanced democracies; and reduce capital gains tax rates to encourage and reward investment. These steps not only will be politically popular; they also are the only realistic way to increase federal revenues to help reduce the deficit. We cannot tax our way out of large and persistent deficits. We can only grow our way out. Tax reform is a sure winner on the counts of both principle and political prudence. Dare congressional Democrats and the president to oppose tax cuts in 2012. Dare them.



Reform the federal government. Address the engine that has brought America to the edge of bankruptcy—the federal government itself. Begin with the congressional budget, which no president will touch. The annual appropriation for Congress lies entirely within Congress's hands. In the two years from 2008 to 2010, Congress's spending on itself grew from $3.7 billion to $4.3 billion, an increase of 17.6 percent. This at a time when American families were suffering through a ruinous recession. Republicans should pointedly include Congress in the return to 2008 levels of spending.

Second, congressional pensions are indefensible by any standard. Congress should set an example and recalibrate pensions downward for all past and present mem-

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bers. For members elected in 2012 and after, it should abolish the congressional retirement system altogether. This wouldn't be the term limits many Americans (mistakenly, I believe) seek; but it would be a sign that the default position is no longer for members of Congress to make a lifetime career in Washington.

The executive branch is also in need of reform. Here are some places to start:

■ Equalize government salaries with those in the private sector by freezing executive and congressional pay for three years.

■ Loosen the mind-boggling civil service protections that make it nearly impossible to fire government employees for incompetence.

■ Reduce executive and congressional benefits to levels comparable with the private sector, including eligibility ages for retirement.

These initiatives will be unpopular inside the Beltway. You will be criticized by both federal employees and the Washington media. You will receive strong support from the electorate across the country.

Reduce federal payments to individuals. Rolling back discretionary spending is important, but the principal engine of growth in federal spending is direct payments to individuals—entitlement spending. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment compensation, and roughly 190 other such programs consume an ever larger share of the federal budget—well over half the federal budget this year. Consider the chart on the previous page and the graph to the right.

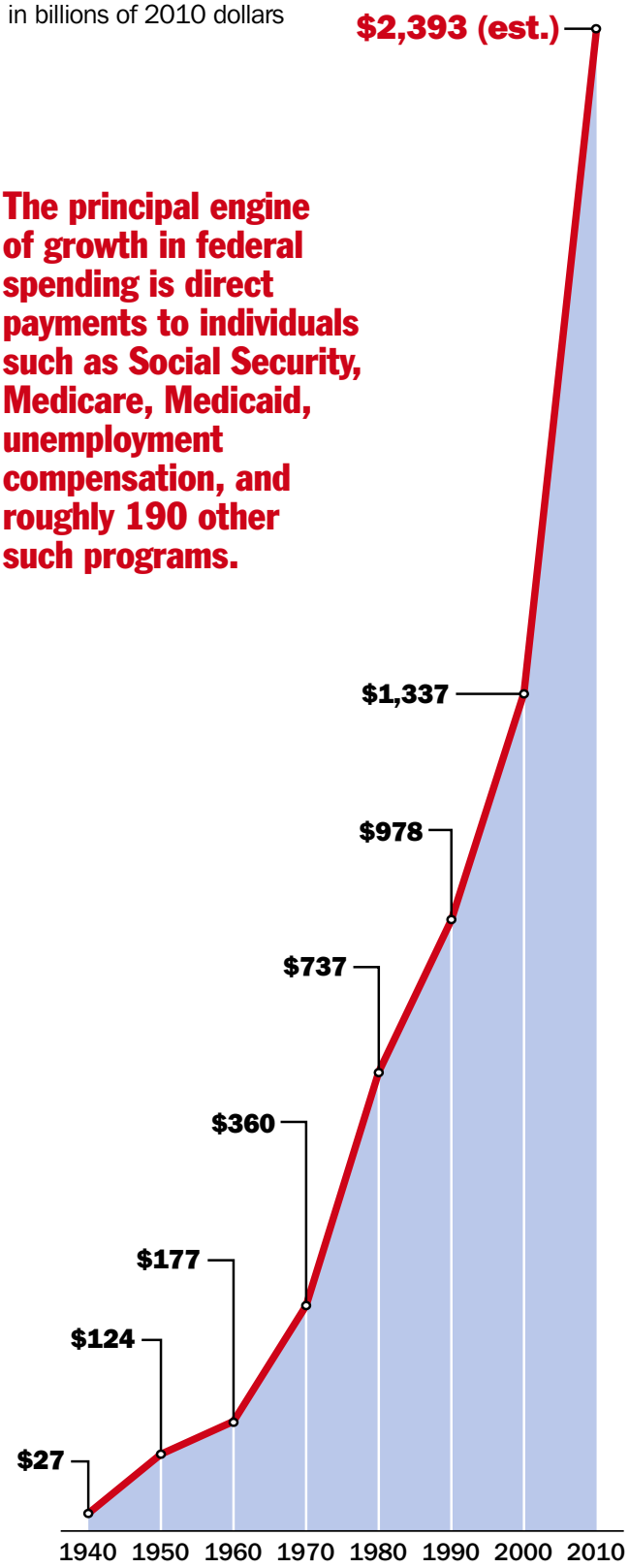
Here is America's real spending problem. Some observers ask why there seems to be so little federal money for large national projects—whether space exploration, infrastructure modernization, high-speed rail, or cutting-edge research. They need look no further. Americans discovered in the 1930s that they could vote themselves benefits, and politicians ever since have been only too eager to oblige.

Whether we should tackle the growth of these programs is not a serious question. They are unsustainable. What we must decide is when and how to modify them. Out of economic necessity, the American private sector has gradually moved away from a pension system of defined benefits and to a system of defined contributions. Government at all levels needs to do the same. In a world of intense economic competition with rising powers and hungry work forces, we cannot afford massive income transfers unrelated to productivity. Down that course lies third world status.

Solving the entitlement problem is easy enough conceptually, but very difficult politically. We may not yet have developed the inbred entitlement mentality of France or Greece, but the political dynamics in the United States are actually much the same. No one wants to cut Social Security benefits, and if either party chooses to demagogue the issue,

Federal Payments to Individuals

Entitlement spending, in billions of 2010 dollars



SOURCE: OMB, Budget for FY 2011, Table II.I.

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there is little hope of joint action. What then is to be done?

Republicans should invite Democrats to participate in an entitlement review commission. This would not be a commission to provide cover for tax increases while adjusting payments at the margins; it would be a commission to examine the role, trend lines, and sustainability of entitlement payments in a nation which must compete in the world economy. Democrats might or might not agree to participate.

More broadly, Republicans should begin a serious effort to explain to the American people the need for intergenerational justice. Reforms of this scope, as the Bush administration learned in 2005, cannot be rushed. The ground must be prepared. Republicans should explain the advantages of medical insurance and retirement accounts which are owned by individuals rather than paid out of current government revenues or borrowing. In this endeavor, they should enlist the young, who will be the main beneficiaries of entitlement reform. Most young Americans already doubt that Social Security will be there for them when they retire; show them how individual retirement accounts work—invested in the same kinds of instruments as pension funds and university endowments and private fortunes across America, with statements sent regularly to the owner, who can plan for retirement.

In all of this, Republicans should stress one major point. Like candidate Obama, who promised during the presidential campaign that everyone who liked their present health insurance could keep it, Republicans should impress upon the public that no one at or near retirement age will be forced into a new program.

Republicans should borrow another page from the political left. What the left does when it cannot pass a program wholesale is contained in the magic words "pilot program." Republicans should push to establish voluntary pilot programs for medical insurance and retirement accounts. Voluntary retirement accounts could be modeled on the federal Thrift Savings Plan, which allows individuals to choose from a prescribed range of options, from financially aggressive to safe. These pilot programs would demonstrate the superior long-term returns of private accounts. They would function much like charter schools in the educational field: While charter schools have not broken the back of status quo inner city education, they have demonstrated to a certainty the superiority of freedom and choice over government mandates.

GOING FORWARD

It may be that not all these initiatives will pass in the next Congress. The Senate might bottle up some of them or amend them in unhelpful ways. The president might veto some or all of them. But at least Congress and the president will be working from a pro-growth, job-creating Republican agenda. People in America are ready for this. They will reward a political party that advances these ideas, whether it can fully achieve them right away or not. What the American people will not reward is business as usual from a Republican Congress.

Perhaps, too, we will discover whether, and in what ways, the Democratic party is committed to the bipartisanship it so often espouses. It has often been said that there has been no bipartisanship on domestic issues during the last two years. This is actually not true. A strong bipartisan majority of all Republicans and 31 Democrats in the House favor the extension of all of the Bush tax cuts. Isn't this an example of bipartisanship? Wouldn't Obamacare have been lauded by the mainstream media as bipartisan legislation if it had secured 31 Republican votes in the House? The way to achieve genuine bipartisanship is to work off a pro-growth, job-creating agenda. Many, if not all, of the initiatives described above will receive some Democratic support.

The American people would like to see a direct and understandable legislative response to their desires. They are tired of being told that there are reasons too subtle and complex for them to understand why it is acceptable to keep spending far more money than we raise. Or that the government must spend even more to achieve an unemployment rate lower than 9.6 percent. Or that every single federal program is so vital that we should borrow 40 cents of each dollar from our children to pay for it. Or that we are really just "spreading the wealth around" when we are actually engaging in outright intergenerational theft. Or that making ever more Americans reliant on government payments is the just and humane path to civic virtue. Or that which medical procedures are available to our families will be determined by what is "fair" in the mind of an assistant secretary of Health and Human Services. Or that it is shameful and xenophobic to adopt a generous and lawful system of immigration and to enforce it at our borders. Or—perhaps most important of all—that America can no longer compete successfully and that we and our children should get used to having less. The American people are not looking for a sociological explanation for our decline as a nation; they are looking for leadership to reverse it.

If President Obama is politically savvy, he will find a way to accommodate significant portions of this agenda. If he is not, let him defend in 2012 a platform of business as usual in Washington, of vast and growing debt, of continued illegal immigration and stalemate for current illegal residents, of higher taxes, of health care controlled by a massive bureaucracy and health insurance premiums ever-rising. Let him run as the candidate of the political class in Washington. As someone once said, "Bring it on." ♦

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Richard Wilbur, 1966

Modern Master

The case for Richard Wilbur

BY JOHN SIMON

Richard Wilbur, born in 1921, is to my mind the supreme American poet of the second half of the past century, and as this new collection shows, continues so undiminished into the present.

He combines the virtues of tradition and innovation. He excels at traditional forms, and is equal master of heroic couplets and blank verse. But he can also create new ones, such as the loose trimeter triplets, with only the first and third line rhyming, as at the start of the title poem:

Out of the snowdrift
Which covered it, this pillared
Sundial starts to lift,

Able now at last
To let its frozen hours
Melt into the past
In bright, ticking drops. . . .

Is there a better way of conveying the coming of spring?

Wilbur's range of topics is wide, and the best one-word description of his work is "elegance." He is free of that touch of illogic, of intense neurosis if not insanity, that characterizes so much contemporary poetry and derails communication. He is concise, original, never obscure for the educated reader willing to use his interpretive skills.

Anterooms
New Poems and Translations
by Richard Wilbur
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 80 pp., $20

What has kept Wilbur so consistently relevant? The interviews he gave the *Paris Review* in the 1970s are still valuable. As he puts it, "I have poems in which I set two voices going against each other. One is a kind of lofty and angelic voice, the other is a slob voice, and these are two parts of myself quarreling in public." In a wider sense, this applies to all his poems, which are both higher and lower brow, gradually, if not immediately, accessible. You could perceive coexistence of the classical (angelic) and modern (slobbish), although not in your prosaic, garden-variety slobbishness.

Consider a short poem, "Terza Rima," named for the interlocking triplets in which Dante composed:

In this great form, as Dante proved in Hell,
There is no dreadful thing that can't be said
In passing. Here, for instance, one could tell

How our jeep skidded sideways toward the dead
Enemy soldier with the staring eyes,
Bumping a little as it struck his head,

And then flew on, as if toward Paradise.

John Simon is the author, most recently, of John Simon on Music: Criticism 1979-2005 *(Applause Books).*

BETTMANN / CORBIS

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Note how the poem, no doubt a memory from his World War II Army days, begins in a traditional manner embodied in the "great form" of terza rima, but then becomes frighteningly modern, to end, ironically, on another (mock) solemn note. Note also the confirmation of what Wilbur likewise said in the *Paris Review*: "I usually have a certain distance from my material, a feeling that I am not spilling my guts but arranging some materials and trying to find out the truth about them." His view of some of his contemporaries is encapsulated in a fascinating early poem, "Cottage Street, 1953," about his mother-in-law's tea party where the suicidal Sylvia Plath, one of the so-called confessional poets, seems "immensely drowned" and destined to go on *To state at last her brilliant negative / In poems free and helpless and unjust*.

No such negativity for Wilbur, who declares, "I feel that the universe is full of glorious energy, that the energy tends to take pattern and shape, and that the ultimate character of things is comely and good." This, he says, "in the teeth of all sorts of contrary evidence."

Take the easefulness, simplicity, and a sort of circumspect optimism in "Out Here."

Strangers might wonder why
That big snow-shovel's leaning
Against the house in July.
Has it some cryptic meaning?

It means at least to say
That, here, we needn't be neat
About putting things away,
As on some suburban street.

What's more, by leaning there
The shovel seems to express,
With its rough and ready air,
A boast of ruggedness.

If a stranger said in sport
"I see you're prepared for snow,"
Our shovel might retort
"Out here, you never know."

Observe, among other things, the classical a-b-a-b rhyme scheme. Rhymes could not feel more spontaneous, more natural, as they inconspicuously contribute to the poem's unobtrusive music.

To be sure, Wilbur is also a *poeta doctus*, a learned poet unashamed of his erudition. Take a poem like "Trismegistus," which refers to the 42 Hermetic Books attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (thrice-great Hermes), the name given by the medieval Neoplatonic philosophers to the Egyptian god Thoth, concerned with the life and lore of the ancient Egyptians. The final octave reads:

Still, still we summon him at midnight hour
To Milton's pensive tower,
And hear him tell again how, then and now,
Creation is a house of mirrors, how
Each herb that sips the dew
Dazzles the eye with many small
Reflections of the All—
Which, after all, is true.

The words in emphasis are, of course, quotations. It helps if we recognize in "Milton's pensive tower" the lines from "Il Penseroso": *Or let my Lamp at midnight hour, / Be seen in some high lonely Tow'r, / Where I may oft out-watch the Bear, / With thrice great Hermes* . . . Such help, though, is not mandatory. Note for example the interplay of the two "stills," each with its own meaning, and of the capitalized "All" with the lower-case "all" in the wonderfully breezy, laconic last line.

Wilbur is also a splendid love poet, as witness "Galveston, 1961," which includes a learned reference to the Nereid Panope, the one sea nymph among her 50 sisters whom sailors invoke for protection. It is a beach poem, first reveling in the charm of the beloved swimming in the sea. When she comes out, the poet urges her:

Shake out your spattering hair
And sprawl beside me here,
Sharing what we can share
Now that we are so near—

Small-talk and speechless love,
Mine being all but dumb
That knows so little of
What goddess you become

And still half-seem to be,
Though close and clear you lie,
Whom droplets of the sea
Emboss and magnify.

Wearing a related but different hat, Wilbur is also the best translator of lyric poetry and verse drama in our language. He has magisterially rendered, into metrical and rhyming, exactly corresponding, English verse many lyric poems from various languages, and numerous plays by Molière, Racine, and Corneille. In *Anterooms* there are fine verse translations from Mallarmé, Verlaine, and the Latin of Symphosius.

In 1963, Randall Jarrell wrote that

> Petronius spoke of the "studied felicity" of Horace's poetry, and I can never read one of Richard Wilbur's books without thinking of this phrase. His impersonal, exactly accomplished, faintly sententious skill produces poems that, ordinarily, compose themselves into a little too regular a beauty—there is no eminent beauty without a certain strangeness.

But he promptly went on to praise sundry Wilbur poems, calling one of them "one of the most nearly perfect poems any American has written." Wilbur elicits this kind of ambivalence. I think it is really a case of perfection unconsciously scaring us, making us feel envious or inadequate. Certainly I am in awe of the liminal poem in *Anterooms*, "The House," which I take to be about Wilbur's lovely deceased wife, Charlee:

Sometimes on wakening, she would close her eyes
For a last look at that white house she knew
In sleep alone, and held no title to,
And had not entered yet, for all her sighs.

What did she tell me of that house of hers?
White gatepost; terrace; fanlight of the door;
A widow's walk above the bouldered shore;
Salt winds that ruffle the surrounding firs.

Is she now there, wherever there may be?
Only a foolish man would hope to find
That haven fashioned by her dreaming mind.
Night after night, my love, I put to sea.

This is the house of the dead to which the living, no matter how loving, have no access. But as Wilbur has said, "One of the jobs of poetry is to make the unbearable bearable, not by falsehood but by a clear, precise confrontation." The pursuit of poetic perfection is not unlike seeking contact with the dead: It may be impossible, but you persevere. ♦

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B&A

Half the Story

A chronicle of the Jewish saga without religion.

BY DAVID WOLPE

'The Finding of Moses' by Raphael, ca. 1517

DAVID LEES / CORBIS

It is difficult to chronicle a global people. Jews have retained their identity through myriad lands and languages, making the simple technical task of writing Jewish history daunting. Even before the tangle of languages, one must decide: Is the primary influence what Jews have made of themselves, or what the world has done to the Jews?

A Short History of the Jews
by Michael Brenner
Princeton, 472 pp., $29.95

Much modern Jewish history is taken with the done-to side of things. The internal engines of Jewish destiny and self-definition seem dwarfed by the larger currents of world history swirling around the Jews. In part this makes sense; after all, the rise of communism or Nazism or the establishment of America was more determinative of modern Jewish history than a thousand learned tomes or community leaders. But there is something crucial missing in a story of Jews that does not give a shaping role to Judaism itself.

Michael Brenner's book is a crisp, able summary of the major events in Jewish history. When necessary, he signals his skepticism of received traditions without being so explicit as to alienate readers across the ideological spectrum: "David, the legendary founder of the Judaic royal house and progenitor of the lineage leading to Josiah, was supposed to have ruled over both kingdoms at the same time." Is this "legendary" as in the biblical minimalists, who doubt David's actual existence, or "legendary" as in "remarkable and influential"? We are not told. Repeatedly Brenner signals his familiarity with modern scholarship and his sympathy with it, but seeks to do so in a way that will not denigrate traditional understandings.

Brenner is more interested in the interactions of the Jews with the world than with the internal dynamics of Jewish history. He says at the outset that "the golden thread that runs throughout this book is migration." Migration was the legacy of a nomadic people responding to an inhospitable world. As a result there is a disproportionate place given to those Jews whose achievements are outside the Jewish community. Any work of Jewish history where Bob Dylan commands the same space as Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzhaki, the preeminent biblical and Talmudic commentator) or where Leonard Nimoy as Mr. Spock rates a picture but, to take but a few examples, Ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Amichai, and Adin Steinsaltz are not mentioned, is a history bewitched by the siren song of "relevance."

Judaism is a notoriously difficult entity to define: Racial, ethnic, and religious elements intermix in often confusing ways, but for much of Jewish history, Jewish practice and belief were determinative. Theology may not have defined who was a Jew, but it surely defined Judaism. Yet one would read Brenner's book with very little understanding of the tradition itself. So we are confronted with the paradoxical spectacle of reading about the age of the Talmud, for example, without being told about the contents of this formative work. Rabbi Akiva is noted as a martyr and a believer in the messiahship of Bar Kokhba, but we hear nothing of his legal creativity or championing of exegesis. Hillel is mentioned only in passing.

This short history of the Jews turns out to be a short history of the political and social life of the Jews, with an emphasis on how the world treated them, punctuated by celebrities whom modern college students would recognize and claim (proudly

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or not) as their own. To some extent this omission invites the Talmudic stricture—*ha-ikar haser min ha-sefer*—the essence is missing from the book. While there is a cursory review of the biblical story there is nothing of the complex of laws, belief, and practices that comprise Judaism for most of its history. Shabbetai Zevi, the false Messiah whose dramatic story was unearthed by Gershom Scholem, gets several pages. Joseph Caro, who along with Moses Isserles wrote the most popular code of Jewish law in a long history, merits two sentences.

Popular history of the Jews used to be written in the salvific mode: History was moving toward an apotheosis—if not exactly eschatological, at least historically redemptive. But modern history does not permit such credulity; progress is no longer a clearly marked highway to messianism, in either the classical or secular versions. "Israel, an embattled homeland" is one more chapter in the saga, hardly distinguishable from other migrations. Certainly nothing in the tone would signal the reader, as in more traditional expositions, that this is the long-awaited culmination of dreams. In contrast to many chroniclers of the Jewish story, Brenner does not permit himself to write in the heroic mode. Here is the most drama-laden sentence in his description of the Warsaw ghetto uprising: "They were able to hold their own for a month without receiving any appreciable assistance from the Polish population outside the ghetto." Accurate, succinct—and utterly removed from anything that might quicken the blood.

Earlier popular books on Jewish history, such as Max Dimont's *Jews, God and History* (1962) and Chaim Potok's *Wanderings* (1978), were criticized for what we might call egregious teleology: They assumed that Jews were heading toward something, that Jewish history was a grand, passionate drama. Brenner is thoroughly unintoxicated. But it made me think of Yeats's damning verdict that the worst thing about some men is that, when they were not drunk, they were sober. ♦

B&A

Tough Town

A critical struggle as seen by Al Jazeera.

BY JAMES F.X. O'GARA

Fallujah is a gritty semi-industrial city west of Baghdad, set squarely in the Sunni triangle, former proud home to such Baathist playgrounds as the Dreamland resort. The city was a major source for the Iraqi Army during the Saddam years and, when things started to go sideways in 2004, became a stomping ground for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and a staging area for thousands of terrorist attacks against Baghdad. Paul Bremer called it a "tough town."

Inside Fallujah
The Unembedded Story
by Ahmed Mansour
Olive Branch, 360 pp., $20

Most Americans, even those who did not follow the Iraq war in the press, remember the battle for Fallujah, the months of buildup, the departure of most residents, and finally the bloody clearing operation led by the Marines with the Black Watch. Fallujah was bloody for many reasons, not least the poor advice the various insurgent groups received from their Chechen advisers, who told the Iraqis to hole up in hundreds of houses, confident that the Americans would not have the intestinal fortitude to root them out, room by room, compound by compound.

This turns out to have been what the military terms a "bad tactical choice." Fighting the Marines is like playing with lawn darts dipped in curare: Someone's going to get hurt. As recounted in *The Strongest Tribe*, Bing West's history of the surge, the fight for Fallujah was really "more than 200 fights *inside* concrete rooms against jihadists determined to kill an American and die a martyr." West claims that the Marines engaged in "more than all of the fights by all of the police SWAT teams in the [United] States in the past three decades."

The Marines would clear some 30,000 compounds. One Marine died and 11 were wounded in a four-hour battle for just one such target, the "House from Hell," defended by Chechens. Sergeant Major Brad Kasal, who led the attack, ended up with seven gunshot wounds and 40 shrapnel wounds—and a Navy Cross. Marines like Sergeant Rafael Peralta jumped on grenades to spare their buddies, the act of heroism that almost always ends with one's own death. Marines poured in to house fights to pull out wounded squad members, then called in precision airstrikes. Then-Captain Doug Zembiec, an All-American wrestler at the Naval Academy, held off hundreds of insurgents in a graveyard. Fallujah cost 151 American and perhaps 2,000 insurgent lives.

John Kael Weston, the State Department official assigned to Marine Lieutenant General James T. Conway, joined the Marines sorting through the human detritus after the Ulema Council in Baghdad contacted the American embassy to ensure Muslim burial procedures were in place. The dead were housed in a refrigerated building that had been used for storing potatoes. The Marines, who dubbed the improvised morgue "the Potato Factory," found only a modest number of foreign fighters; contrary to expectations, most of the dead were Iraqis.

Fallujah was a decisive victory, but

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Third Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, Fallujah, 2004

LCPL. MIGUEL A. CARRASCO JR. / DOD / ZUMA PRESS / NEWSCOM

there was an earlier battle of Fallujah, mostly forgotten except for the *casus belli*. A small and changeable U.S. presence had already meant five different battalions in six months, and the city had already erupted once, in 2003. Then on a sunny day in March 2004, four American Blackwater employees, newly arrived in the country, were led into a trap.

The ambush area had been cleared of civilians minutes earlier by an insurgent grenade; the four Americans were cornered, shot to pieces, dismembered, set ablaze, dragged behind vehicles, and hanged from the nearest bridge. The Marine Expeditionary Force based outside the city and unable to do anything but cause vastly greater Iraqi casualties in an operation to retrieve the bodies, watched through a drone downlink and waited for the mob to burn itself out.

Coming as this did just days before the anniversary of the American occupation, the attack was viewed as (and probably was) a challenge to the United States. A decision was reached, hastily in hindsight, and over the objections of the Marine commander: Take Fallujah. The battle that followed saw one Marine tactical success after another followed by widespread rioting in the southern cities of Kut and Najaf, and a collapse of political support from the Iraqi Governing Council, a creature of the Coalition Provisional Authority that had finally found a way to assert its own legitimacy. The curiosity of sympathetic uprisings in the Shia south is the more remarkable considering that a caravan of medical supplies would be sent to Fallujah from Sadr City, a degree of interconfessional solidarity that would have been unthinkable even a year later.

In the end, the Marine advance was halted within days of making mission as the feared 6,000-mile screwdriver started turning, with Condoleezza Rice, then national security adviser, at one point reaching down to the Fallujah civilian-military operations center to talk to a colonel about reports of civilian casualties. A ceasefire was followed by an incomprehensible series of negotiations.

The bloody and almost contemporaneous battle for Ramadi generated virtually none of this indignation over its five hard-fought days. The difference? In the hours before the "clear" phase of the Fallujah operation began, a resourceful Al Jazeera camera crew, led by Egyptian correspondent Ahmed Mansour, found a smuggler's trail into the city and managed to sneak in and set up shop, satellite dish and all. The tone of the coverage that followed was set by Al Jazeera and the network's claim of 600 civilian deaths. While completely unsubstantiated, the number was quickly accepted as gospel by a press corps lacking other information. Newly minted facts followed in due course, as when Al Jazeera gave air time to a member of the Iraqi Muslim Ulema Council in Baghdad, who said he had "heard" that "more than 157 women were killed, mostly by snipers." In Bing West's words, Al Jazeera "portrayed the battle as a slaughter of the innocents." General Conway put it more crisply: "Al Jazeera kicked our butts."

Al Jazeera's tone was All-Spanish-Civil-War-all-the-time. The coverage portrayed popular "resistance" against the "occupation forces" and failed to distinguish among insurgents, foreign fighters, local thugs, and hopped-up squads of Sunni youth practicing "shoot and scoot" with AK-47s and RPGs. On April 8, for example, Mansour noted that Fallujans had asked him to send a "message" that "we either live with dignity or die as martyrs and we will not surrender to the U.S. forces, even if we remain under siege for a year." The next day, Mansour reported that a "real war is taking place in Fallujah between the defenders of Fallujah, who are determined to defend it until the last drop of blood, as they say, and the U.S. forces, which are deployed on the outside of the city." Insurgent motives were invariably praised:

> They wanted to see no invader desecrating their soil and subjecting their people to cruelty and injustice, and they were determined to get what they wanted even if it cost them their lives.

Despite the tough talk, Al Jazeera's coverage suffered from a tendency to oscillate between grossly exaggerated accounts of Marine brutality (Fallujans as helpless mice) interspersed with gro-

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tesque descriptions of the would-be conquerors having their heads handed to them. A typical example of this is where Mansour describes the Marines as being

> far weaker in this battle than they had claimed they would be, as illustrated by the losses they were enduring at the hands of the insurgents. They also turned out to be much, much less diligent than any army should be in terms of guarding against the needless slaughter of civilians.

So weak, yet so deadly. General Conway describes snipers as "our most discriminate weapon, a Marine firing three ounces of lead at a precise target." Time and again, Mansour reported as fact rumors that those same Marine snipers were deliberately targeting civilians, especially teenage girls, and had "orders to shoot anyone on sight." In one of many such Al Jazeera reports, Marine snipers are blamed for shooting two children in the Nazzal neighborhood: The parents call for an ambulance, but no dice. Mansour reports that the hospital told them that the Marines "had bombed every ambulance the hospital had sent to the Nazzal neighborhood."

On April 9, Mansour reported that the Marines were using cluster bombs: "An hour ago, fighter planes dropped containers, which the people of Fallujah affirm, through their distinctive noise, are containers for cluster bombs," a loaded charge calculated to resonate with viewers familiar with Israel's conflict in Lebanon: The United States and Israel are targeting Arabs everywhere. Get it? In Al Jazeera's style manual, the words "shelling" and "bombing" are invariably preceded by "indiscriminate."

But in the conquerors-having-their-heads-handed-to-them department, Al Jazeera broadcast triumphalist accounts of downed helicopters: Four American helicopters were lost in or near the city (at that point two-thirds of the actual rotary wing losses in Iraq since the fall of Baghdad). In a rare reference to insurgents, on April 7, Mansour reported, "Dozens of meters away, masked armed men from the defenders of the city were deployed, carrying rockets." In fact, these brief examples are just about the only appearance the insurgents make in Mansour's coverage and in this book, perhaps because there is no way to write around them. Mansour is defensive about this, but he has an explanation: The Americans were easy to spot, with their aircraft and their snipers. The insurgents—numbering in the thousands—were stealthy and did not want to be interviewed, even if their names were withheld.

Of course, the problem with this explanation is that it is absurd. It would have been easier for Mansour to interview the insurgents than not. There were literally thousands of part-time insurgents running down Fallujah's boulevards firing AK-47s and RPGs at all hours, many of them local toughs, as part of this "popular uprising." Yet not even an attention-seeking *ibn shuwaria*, "son of the streets" in Iraqi parlance, apparently agreed to be interviewed. Mansour chose not to, in order, one can only presume, to maintain the story line that the battle pitted murderous snipers and F-16s dropping cluster bombs against a unified populace.

Al Jazeera was banned from news coverage for one month in 2004 when it transpired that the network had received advance notice of bombings and had failed to notify the authorities. The network was also known for airing "snuff" videos. Bing West describes the scene in Fallujah when Marines uncovered Al Qaeda in Iraq head Abu Musab al Zarqawi's torture studio, where six months earlier Nicholas Evan Berg's head had been sawed off on camera:

> On a table was a glass of water with ice in it. In the next room were two computers, klieg lights, a CD burner, two video cameras, VHS tapes, a television, a VCR, and a recording schedule typed in English. The schedule included what time a prisoner was to be brought out and washed up, when his confession had to be taped, when the execution should be done, how long it would take to digitize the video and make copies, and when to leave Fallujah in order to deliver the tape to the Al Jazeera studio in Baghdad to be shown on prime time.

Over the course of the battle, Mansour becomes convinced that the Marines are targeting his crew. For instance, he hears that a person who had aided the crew has been injured in an airstrike and forms the immediate conclusion—after all, people had been "telling him" that Al Jazeera was being "targeted"—that the man's house had been demolished as part of an effort to go after the news crew. This turns out to have been a misunderstanding. The man was hit while walking in the streets, but the conviction that the Americans were targeting Al Jazeera remains.

This leads to one of the book's moments of unintentional hilarity, when Mansour and his crew are taping a funeral and end up being pursued by a mob convinced that they are "agents of the murderous occupation." Mansour is shocked by the sheer ingratitude of it all and threatens the crowd with decamping to another part of town. "My cameraman and my crew are here in Fallujah to convey your hurt and suffering to the rest of the world," Mansour protested, "not to help the American forces."

The lessons of Fallujah are several. The Marines have assimilated tactical "lessons learned" and are putting them to use to good effect today in Afghanistan: Know the neighborhood, build a census, develop a localized intelligence collection capability, many repeat tours across the ranks. The public affairs lessons are straightforward, for instance, in the way the second battle for Fallujah was telegraphed for weeks, and broad media coverage was supported by the military.

Colonel (now Brigadier General) Larry Nicholson was the regimental commander of the 5th Marine Regiment in Fallujah during 2006-07, a terrible year to be a Marine in Iraq. Nicholson will be remembered for the work he did to help jump-start the Anbar Awakening; but two years prior, during the run up to Fallujah II, Colonel Nicholson commanded the 1st Marine Regiment until a rocket attack killed one of his staff officers and sent him to Bethesda Naval Hospital for two months. His summary of the lessons learned for the second Fallujah battle is concise: "This time there would be no timeouts and cease-fires where the enemy held interviews with the media, no time for the enemy to do anything except fight, die, or run." ♦

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B&A

Reality Bytes

Close to drowning in the sea of technology.

BY ANDREW PALMER

The Austrian writer Daniel Kehlmann's most recent novel was a comic/philosophical fictionalization of the lives of two famous 19th-century German scientists, Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Friedrich Gauss. It's hard to imagine such a book gaining broad appeal, but *Measuring the World* is a hugely appealing book, written with great vitality and wit, and it became a spectacular European bestseller. Kehlmann, who at 31 had already published several well-received books of fiction, was, to the extent that a 21st-century German novelist can be, famous. Now he's written a novel called *Fame*. Though a few of its many characters are celebrities, its real subject is the nature of reality.

Kehlmann demonstrated in *Measuring the World* that he could take up such potentially ponderous ontological concerns without boring or patronizing a general audience. He writes of Gauss, who has surveyed vast areas of Germany:

> Sometimes it was as if he hadn't just measured the region, but invented it, as if it had only achieved its reality through him. Where once there had been nothing but trees, peat bogs, stones, and grassy mounds, there was now a net of grades, angles, and numbers.

But Kehlmann also calls into question the ultimate value of natural science, mischievously planting a number of vivid dreams and hallucinations in the mind of *ur*-empiricist Humboldt, including visions of a sea monster and a flying saucer. By presenting such visions as no less real than the plants and animals and landscapes that Humboldt so carefully measures, *Measuring the World* comes to resemble, at certain points, a work of magical realism.

Daniel Kehlmann

Fame
A Novel in Nine Episodes
by Daniel Kehlmann
translated by Carol Janeway
Pantheon, 192 pp., $24

Fame also challenges the authority of perceived reality, but here displacements are caused not by sea monsters but by cell phones, not space ships but YouTube. The novel's rhetoric isn't subtle. "How strange," opines one of its narrators,

> that technology has brought us into a world where there are no fixed places anymore. You speak out of nowhere, you can be anywhere, and because nothing can be checked, anything you choose to imagine is, at bottom, true. If no one can prove to me where I am, if I myself am not absolutely certain, where is the court that can adjudicate these things? Real places anchored in space existed before we had little walkie-talkies and wrote letters that arrived in the same second they were dispatched.

As if to enact this Internet-era instability, *Fame* is divided into nine episodes, each with a different protagonist, which turn out to be connected in various clever ways, becoming more and more thoroughly intertwined as the novel progresses. One episode, for example, follows a successful and self-absorbed novelist, Leo Richter, from the perspective of his girlfriend Elisabeth, as he becomes increasingly frustrated with his hosts and audiences on a lecture tour in Latin America. When PEN officials invite him to make an appearance in Central Asia ("Turkmenistan, I think. Or Uzbekistan."), he suggests they ask a friend of his, Maria Rubinstein, instead. The next episode is a metafictional conversation between Leo and a character from a short story he's written. A later episode—one of the novel's strongest—tells the story of Maria Rubinstein's trip to the unnamed Central Asian country where, after her hosts abandon her, her visa expires, she is arrested, and she eventually comes to live as a sort of servant for a peasant family.

Rubinstein has fallen into what many other characters in *Fame* actively wish for: an alternate life. In the first episode, "Voices," a computer technician, Ebling, discovers that the number of his new cell phone has long been assigned to a man named Ralf. At first Ebling hangs up on callers trying to reach Ralf, but after he discovers he has a similar voice, he starts pretending to be this mystery man, calling off important-sounding meetings and blindly juggling dramatic relationships with various women. By the end, Ebling's own life, character-

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ized by a stupid son and a wife who's a "lousy cook," comes to seem dully oppressive.

The narrator of another episode, "A Contribution to the Debate," finds refuge from his otherwise bleak life in Internet forums. Known only by his online name *mollwit* (though in a later episode we learn his name is Mollwitz), he spends most of his workday online, gossiping about celebrities, perpetuating conspiracy theories, and insulting other anonymous posters. His boss asks him to speak at a telecommunications conference, but in the real world he is hapless, and his presentation is a disaster. At the end of the episode *mollwit* assesses his life thus:

> All I have forever is me. Only right here, on this side. I'll never get onto the other side, never. No alternative universe. Early tomorrow, back to work. Weather forecast terrible. Even if it were good, so what? Everything goes on the way it always has.

Fame is full of similarly bald thesis statements, and it suffers from them. Kehlmann touches so often on the apparently fluid nature of contemporary reality, and the danger of mistaking virtual worlds for the real world, that character and story often seem at the mercy of such ideas. Many of his ideas, moreover, fail to advance far beyond the received wisdom, and his most strongly stated points seem exaggerated and underexplored. How do traditional alternative realities like books and movies compare to newer ones like Internet forums? Can't the Internet function as a useful extension of the "real world" rather than a ghostly alternative to it? Is anything you choose to imagine really, *at bottom*, true?

Measuring the World, though it was full of them, didn't register as a novel of ideas. It moved too briskly, and was too attentive to the telling (and often comic and surprising) detail. *Fame*, too, is written with lightness and humor, and offers plenty of satisfactions, many stemming from its ingenious structure. But despite the many realities Kehlmann presents here, the world he has built to contain them is oddly insubstantial. ♦

B&A

Faithful Voting

A famous campaign's sectarian side.

BY MARK TOOLEY

Joseph Biden's election to the vice presidency was only the second time that a Roman Catholic has ascended to national elected office. Barack Obama's election as America's first black president obviously was more momentous—but why so little attention to Biden's Catholicism? John Kerry was only the third Roman Catholic to receive a major presidential nomination, but most Catholic voters opposed him in 2004, such was the minimal importance of Catholic vs. Protestant in 21st-century American politics.

The Making of a Catholic President
Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960
by Shaun Casey
Oxford, 272 pp., $27.95

In 1960, Catholic vs. Protestant still mattered, and Shaun Casey's study competently tells how John Kennedy, just barely, became the nation's first Roman Catholic chief executive. Casey alleges, with documentation, that the Nixon campaign secretly conspired with some Protestant church groups and prominent clergy (including Billy Graham) to mobilize against Kennedy. Meanwhile, the Kennedys sought ties to Protestant leaders, if only to neutralize their opposition.

Casey teaches Christian Ethics at the United Methodist Wesley Seminary in Washington and led religious outreach for the Obama campaign. Presumably he sees parallels between Kennedy as first Catholic president and Obama as first black president, although he avoids such comparisons here. More dubiously, he does try to claim that the covert Protestant opposition to Kennedy in 1960 was a foreshadowing of the modern Religious Right.

Suspicions about Roman Catholics in high office existed among both liberal and conservative Protestants in 1960. Their concerns were mostly cultural and historical and not rooted in specific issues. Potential diplomatic recognition of the Vatican and government funding of parochial schools were much ballyhooed, though not consequential. In contrast, the modern Religious Right arose in the late 1970s mostly among conservative evangelicals but also including some conservative Catholics, in response to specific culture-war issues such as abortion, school prayer, and tax exemption for religious schools.

In 1960, liberal Protestant critics of Kennedy included Methodist bishops, the National Council of Churches, *Christian Century*, *Christianity and Crisis*, and Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU), today called Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. (Ultimately turning hard left, POAU's direct-mail campaigns in later years would allege encroaching theocracy with every government-hosted Christmas tree or high school baccalaureate, portraying conservative Protestants and Catholics equally as the enemy.)

Conservative Protestant opponents (or skeptics) of Kennedy included the National Association of Evangelicals, Southern Baptists, the Assemblies of God, the Churches of Christ, *Christianity Today*, and Billy Graham. Defying any conservative/liberal label, there was Norman Vincent Peale, too, Nixon's sometime pastor at the Marble Collegiate Church in New York, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* and

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the target of Adlai Stevenson's famous quip, "I find [Saint] Paul appealing, and Peale appalling."

Peale moderated a conclave of Protestant clergy in Washington in September 1960 to strategize against Kennedy. Media were officially barred, but a *Newsday* reporter, joined by the *Washington Post*, sneaked into an adjoining sound box and overheard the unvarnished proceedings. Publication of the clergy's agenda embarrassed Peale and another organizer, the Presbyterian medical missionary L. Nelson Bell, Graham's father-in-law, and Peale and others had to publicly disavow any explicit anti-Kennedy campaign plans. Indeed, Peale was especially embarrassed and largely avoided political involvement for his remaining 33 years.

As Casey tells it, that convocation, called the National Conference of Citizens for Religious Freedom, was chiefly instigated by the National Association of Evangelicals. But it cooperated closely with the Nixon campaign and was helped by Billy Graham, who seems to have stayed in Europe for much of the campaign to avoid public involvement. The public statement that eventually emerged, which Peale dutifully read at a press conference, had been composed by the Republican National Committee, to which the Kennedy campaign had been alerted by a secret informant within POAU. *Newsday* and *Washington Post* reports about the proceedings discredited Peale, who Casey reports went into a depression, even offering to resign his pulpit, partly because Graham declined to acknowledge his own behind-the-scenes role, leaving Peale to take the press hits. Reinhold Niebuhr accused Peale of "blind prejudice," Catholic ethicist John Courtney Murray bemoaned anti-Catholic bigotry, and Richard Nixon himself denounced the meeting on *Meet the Press*.

Casey writes that Billy Graham's "fingerprints" were all over the Protestant anti-Kennedy covert effort throughout the campaign, even sharing his mailing list with the Nixon campaign. In his memoirs, however, Graham downplays his role, referring instead to pro-Nixon "allusions" he made before the May 1960 Southern Baptist Convention but otherwise crediting "divine intervention" for keeping him from directly endorsing Nixon. Nevertheless the clergy conference, fiasco though it may have been, did succeed in unnerving the Democrats and persuaded Kennedy to address the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. His famous speech there prompted Sam Rayburn to declare, "He ate 'em blood raw."

The vignettes about Graham and Peale are among this book's most vivid. Also interesting is an account of Kennedy's meeting with the Council of Methodist Bishops in a Senate office building in 1959. Methodist bishops are politically inconsequential today, but a half-century ago they represented America's largest Protestant denomination, and the meeting was covered by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time*, which likened Kennedy to Daniel entering the lion's den. Once again, reporters were barred, so photographs showed a courageous Kennedy from behind, entering the arena, with dark-suited, somber Methodist prelates looking on inquisitorially beyond the door. As it happens, the meeting went well—although the bishops received Hubert Humphrey, a fellow Methodist, with more enthusiasm.

Henry Cabot Lodge, Richard Nixon, 1960

ED CLARK / TIME & LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES

The president of the Methodist bishops at the time was Bromley Oxnam, formerly of Boston, whom Kennedy "feared," according to Casey, and Joseph Kennedy regarded with an "unholy horror," seeing Oxnam as anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, and likely anti-Democratic. In fact, Oxnam was a liberal Democrat who had supported Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Adlai Stevenson. Oxnam had famously and successfully rebutted charges of being a fellow traveler in testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and during a 1958 meeting with Kennedy had been thoroughly charmed, and credited JFK with possessing more "integrity" than Richard Nixon. Kennedy told Oxnam he had no plans for diplomatic ties to the Vatican, and assured him that, while personally opposed to birth control, he would not oppose federal funding for birth control.

Oxnam never openly endorsed Kennedy, and it's not known how (or whether) he voted. But during the 1960 primaries, Oxnam joined other senior clerics in declaring that no candidate should be discounted because of his "chosen faith." The Kennedy charm offensive had worked.

On a more entertaining note, some Protestant leaders apparently got wind of Kennedy's relentless philandering. Billy Graham wrote to warn him that he had "overheard" malicious gossip, but two Kennedy confidants reassuringly "clarified" the story. The president of Union Seminary in New York more assertively asked Adlai Stevenson if a promiscuous John F. Kennedy was fit for the presidency, sourcing the "rumors" back to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith by way of Reinhold Niebuhr. Stevenson, Galbraith, and Schlesinger all seem to have persuaded the Union president that Kennedy's sexual escapades were history.

Of course, had opponents aggressively exposed Kennedy's private life, they could have disenchanted both Protestant and Catholic supporters. But more than a few liberal Protestants may have simply agreed with Niebuhr: "I never thought I'd be voting for a compulsive adulterer, but he certainly has a better grasp of the situation than Nixon." ♦

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B&A

Senior Momentum

The art of arthritic mayhem. **BY JOHN PODHORETZ**

Dame Helen Mirren

Movies specialize in fantasy fulfillment, and what could be more of a fantasy fulfillment than a scene in which a man in his fifties or older beats up a man in his thirties? Such a scene is the centerpiece of *Red*, the comedy action thriller in which Bruce Willis, 55, plays a retired CIA hit man targeted for elimination by his old agency. Willis breaks into Langley and destroys the office and the face of the operative, two decades younger, assigned to kill him. Later, Helen Mirren, 65, knocks a young Secret Service agent unconscious with a karate chop to the neck. Morgan Freeman, 73, outguns a professional assassin with a full head of hair. (Freeman is an old hand at this: Six years ago, in *Million Dollar Baby*, his character got into a boxing ring and knocked out a punk 50 years his junior.)

Red
Directed by
Robert Schwentke

The director of *Million Dollar Baby*, Clint Eastwood, did Freeman one better in *Gran Torino* a few years later; his character, a mean coot nearing 80, takes out an entire gang of teenage thugs. Michael Caine, at 76, did exactly the same last year in *Harry Browne*. And Sylvester Stallone has found himself an improbable second career by putting *Rocky* back in the ring at 60, sending a near-geriatric Rambo into Burma to rescue a suffering tribe and, last summer, gathering a group of mercenaries to wreak havoc in *The Expendables*.

Red is a modest hit, as was *The Expendables*. *Million Dollar Baby* won a row of Oscars, including one for Freeman. And *Gran Torino* earned $270 million worldwide. The fantasies being fulfilled here are clearly resonating with the very people these movies are aiming at. Male baby boomers who once thrilled to the Pete Townshend lyric "hope I die before I get old" are finding themselves uniquely susceptible to movies that allow them to indulge in the notion that they are tougher, harder, and stronger than those younger and more hirsute than they. "Talkin' 'bout my generation" isn't all that much fun if the talk is of Lipitor and cystoscopes; much more fun if "my generation" can instead beat up people for whom statins and prostate exams are decades off.

Red may actually be the first comic-book movie for the Activia generation. I mean that literally; it was co-produced by DC Comics. Director Robert Schwentke tries to keep things light and cartoonish. Willis lives in a suburban house into which thousands of bullets are pumped one night, and nary a neighbor comes out to check up on the noise. Similar hails of bullets fly about downtown New Orleans and Chicago without attracting attention. People get into a car in the South, fall asleep, and wake up in New Jersey.

The screenplay by Jon and Erich Hoeber is full of har-har pseudo-nostalgia: "I miss the old days," a Russian agent laments as he shares a vodka with a Cold War adversary. "I haven't killed anyone in years." Richard Dreyfuss, showing up as an evil defense contractor who seems simultaneously to have a Southern accent and a Brooklyn accent, declares "I'm the bad guy" to all and sundry. "Can I kill him now?" asks an exasperated John Malkovich, who plays the requisite lovable psycho weapons expert.

It's all supposed to be in good fun, even that part of the plot that features a deserved assassination attempt on the vice president, who is said to have committed a war crime in Guatemala in 1981. Ordinarily, anti-American nihilistic nonsense of this sort would have had my blood pressure skyrocketing, but after a decent first half-hour, *Red* goes so slack that I barely had a pulse in its final 90 minutes. The only way I knew I was alive, in fact, was by checking my email and Twitter feed regularly.

How many jokes about how much fun it used to be back in the old days can you take when those old days weren't your old days? For when the fantasy that a fantasy-fulfillment movie is fulfilling isn't your fantasy, you're left with very little unless the movie itself is terrifically clever and surprising. That can happen. The best example I can think of was the first *Transformers* movie, which became a worldwide sensation not because we all are interested in robots that look like cars but because it was unexpectedly funny.

Red is like listening to someone talk about his great golf shot when you've never played golf, or a story about reeling in a big fish when the only boat you've ever been on is the Staten Island Ferry. I know Baby Boomers have always had trouble coping with the demands of maturity, but gentlemen, you're actors; for God's sake, act your age. ♦

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, *is* THE WEEKLY STANDARD*'s movie critic.*

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PARODY

"On November the 3rd, the day after this coming election, there will be in Washington, D.C., a Democratic majority in the House and a Democratic majority in the Senate. That will be the case. And if it were not illegal, I'd make book on it." **—Vice President Joseph Biden, *August 20, 2010***

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any kind of meas
So we were wrong. WRONG.
right. So doesn't that make you happy?

NOVEMBER 9, 2010 ONE DOLLAR CHEAP

CHASTENED BIDEN GROWS CAUTIOUS IN PREDICTIONS

'I Guarantee Thanksgiving Lands on Thursday This Year'

By JEFF ZELENY

WASHINGTON — Vice President Joseph Biden, chastened by his partially correct prediction that Congress would remain Democratic, told supporters at a fundraiser last night he was "mostly right" about his political prognostications. "I said that on Election Day the Democrats would continue their control of the Senate and I was right. It was the case. And I wish I could've made book on it." When reporters later asked him about his House prediction, the vice president said he misspoke. "The way I put it, I can see how someone might have gotten the wrong impression about what I meant." Biden refused to elaborate, however, on precisely what he meant.

At the Hay-Adams hotel, the vice president assured attendees that "on November the 6th, 2012, there will be a pretty good chance that Barack Obama will be reelected president—assuming, of course, he decides to run again. Maybe he won't. But I think he will."

Asked to clarify, Biden explained he was betting "on the absolute certainty" that the president "is thinking about running again. It is on his mind, no doubt about it." As for the vice president still being on the ticket, Biden said he was also "fairly certain" he would be Obama's running mate. His belief was based on a brief email exchange he had with presidential aide Reggie Love.

AP IMAGES

"I bet you anything that I'll remember to wash my hands before supper," declared Vice President Biden.

"I can promise you that you may very well end up seeing my name on a ballot," he said. "In fact, I'd say it's more than likely, just as it's more than likely that at a buffet dinner, if you decide to get a new plate, a waiter will take away your old plate. But sometimes you come back to your table and your dirty plate is still there. Ever have that happen? Then you gotta start stacking plates."

He went on to bet that the open bar in the ballroom would become a cash bar after 11 p.m. This prediction turned out to be true.

As for the odds of Democrats retaking the House of Representatives in 2012, said Biden, "Anything is possible. An asteroid could hit Earth. Dallas could win the Super

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What Obama Learned from the Midterms

'It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game'

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